

The Alchemist Who Survived

Now Dreams of a Quiet City Life

03



Usata Nonohara

Illustration by OX

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Translation by Erin Husson

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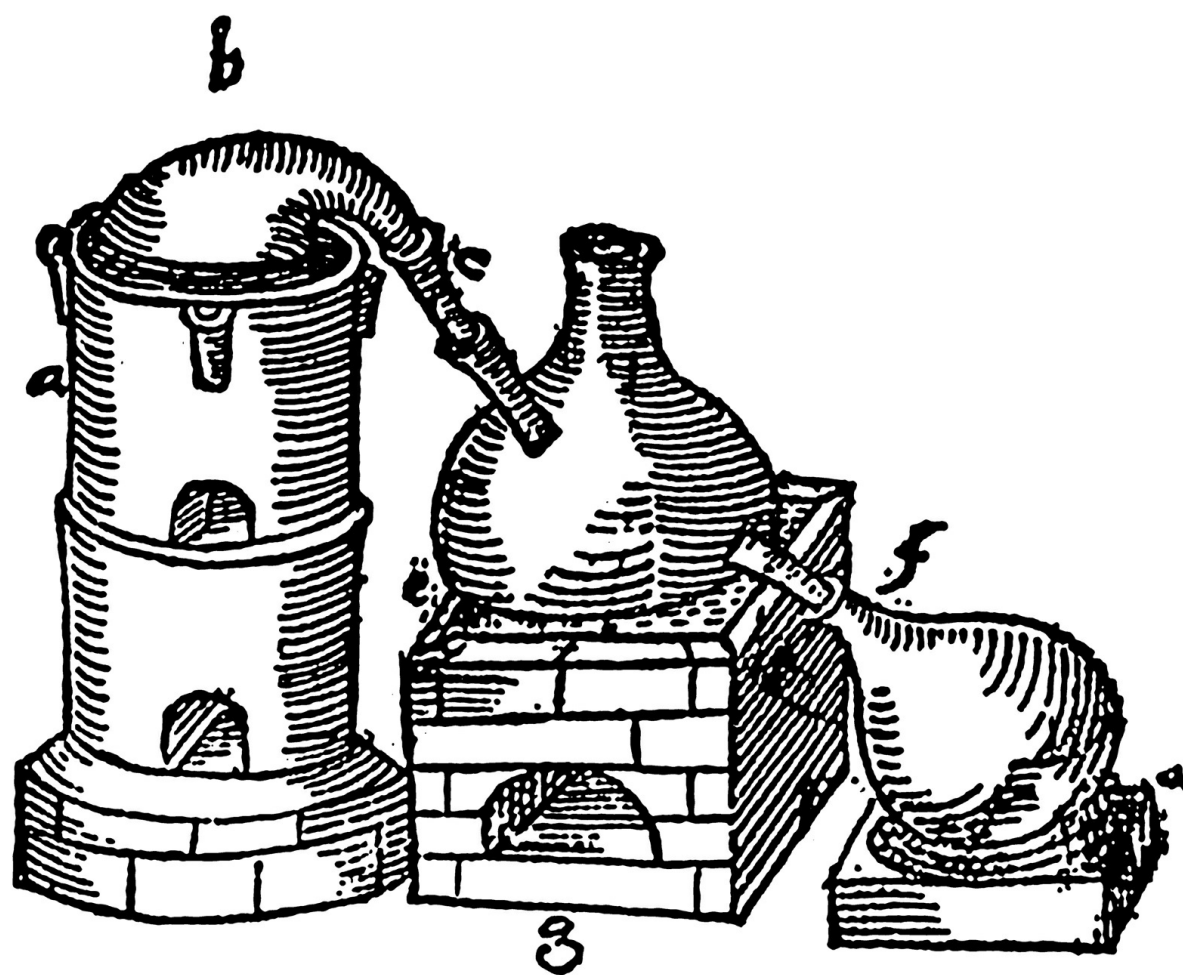
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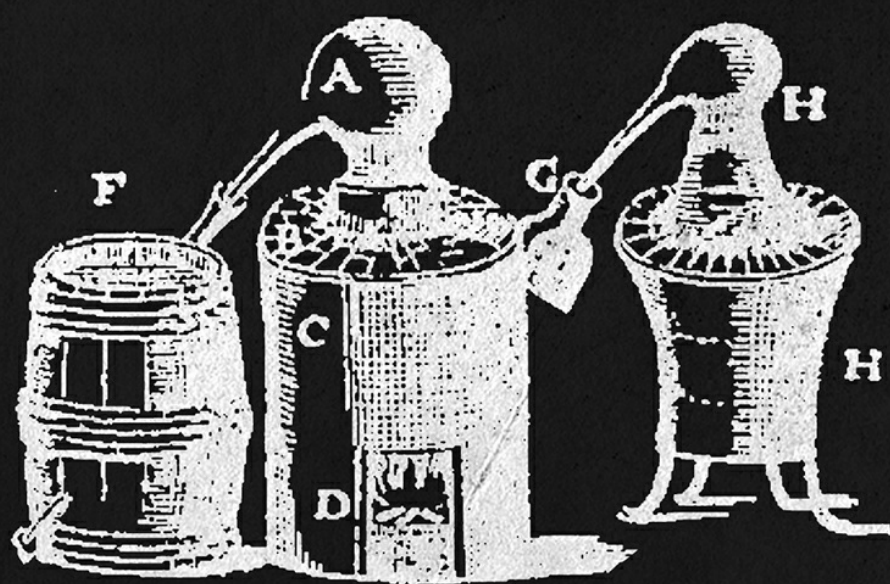
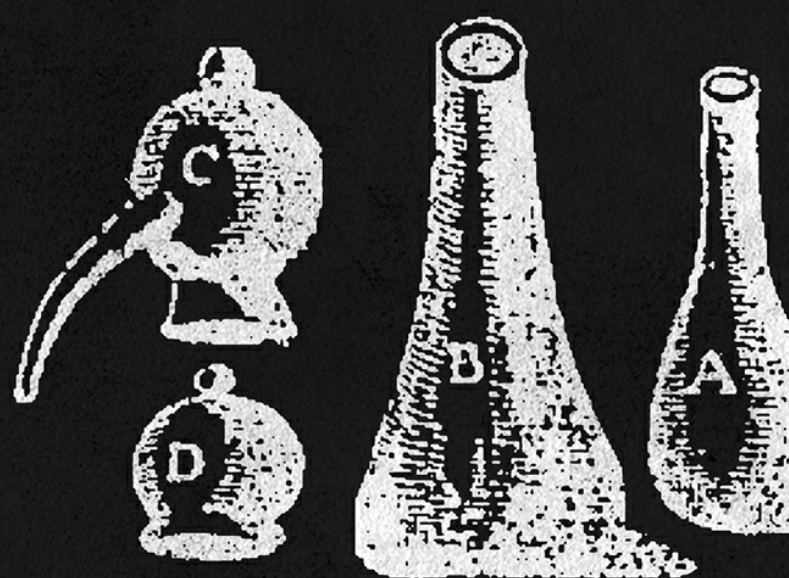
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Hey!
The Japanese edition
of this novel begins with a
manga section. To preserve the
right-to-left reading orientation of the
material, we've moved that section to the
back of the book, so flip to the end,
read that first, then come back
here to enjoy the rest of
the story!





PROLOGUE

Snow at Dawn





01



He stretched his arms toward the snow falling from the night sky.

Without the moon or stars in sight, the inky ether seemed to stretch on forever. Collapsed onto the ground and immobilized, all Siegmund could do was look up at the sprawling canvas above, which looked to him like the darkest pits of hell.

Was he looking up at this gloom? Or down into it?

The powdered snow appeared to gently quiver, hovering in place in this black void instead of falling from the sky. His back flush with the earth, Sieg was starting to lose his sense of direction.

Snowflakes landed on his outstretched hand; he was determined to catch one of them. But they all dissolved into beads of water in his palms, spilling from his hands—which were incapable of holding on to anything.

“Ugh... Gah...” When Sieg twisted his body to try to sit up somehow, his bones creaked, and he let out a guttural groan that broke through the silence.

“To think you’d call yourself an escort when this is all you can offer.” Bearing down on Sieg in his incapacitated state was a man with chilling eyes that penetrated him to the very core.

Jack Nierenberg. The head of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces’ medical team. The one who boasted unrivaled strength in his antipersonnel combat skills.

Targeting the vitals, his pinpoint attacks had whittled away at Siegmund’s stamina, leaving him without even the strength to get up. And yet, seeing Sieg dig his nails into the frozen earth in an attempt to stand elicited an admiring “Huh...” from Nierenberg.

“Please... Please stop it. Sieg... Mr. Nierenberg...,” begged Mariela in a trembling voice, keeping their battle in check.

As she spoke, she let out puffs of white breath, signifying the biting cold of the outdoors. She quivered slightly—chilled, perhaps, in her thin clothes and lack of a proper overcoat.

If only she hadn't consulted Caroline about magical tools that day... If only she hadn't boarded Caroline's carriage back then... Maybe Mariela would have remained in the dark and lived in peace with Sieg. But what good was it to yearn for the immutable past?

After all, it would be a long time until morning, and even an outstretched hand couldn't hold on to anything.

"All right, wrap it up. Breakfast's ready."

"Mm, is it that time already? We'll continue after hours, Sieg."

"Understood. Thank you, Dr. Nierenberg."

"You must be cold, Sieg. I heated up the bath. Why don't you go get warm?"

"Whoa, it's freezing out here. I made the soup, Papa!"

"Is that right? You know you didn't have to tag along so early in the morning, Sherry."

"But I wanna be with you, Papa. And don't worry; I'll take a nap if I get sleepy."

From the rear garden, Mariela and the Nierenbergs thronged into Sunlight's Canopy. Sieg followed them, unsteady on his feet.

After the incident with the Aguinas family, Sunlight's Canopy had accumulated more members.

Ever since that fated day, that fated hour at the Aguinas estate, Mariela's life started to teem with even more activity. Including early in the morning before the sun had risen.

After rolling around in the powdered snow, Sieg was covered in mud and positively starving. He'd rather scarf down his breakfast before bathing, but the two girls probably wouldn't let him at the dining table in this state.

It was still early, and even though Sieg's outstretched hand couldn't hold on

to anything, a heartwarming sight spread beyond the open doors of Sunlight's Canopy.



02



As Mariela understood it, Jack Nierenberg had come to Sunlight's Canopy for Caroline's insecticide.

Several days after the incident with the Aguinas family, she was beyond surprised when Lieutenant General Weishardt of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces himself traveled incognito to Sunlight's Canopy, along with Nierenberg and someone else appearing to be a trusted aide.

It was after the shop had closed, meaning there were no other customers. In the cozy corner for older men, a radiant prince perched in the spot where Gordon the dwarf had hunkered down just a few hours ago. Although the sun had set and left the area in shadow, that little corner strangely appeared brighter than ever before.

According to the attendant's explanation, Caroline's older brother Robert required long-term medical care, meaning Caroline would inherit the family name. Of course, her engagement with the alchemist in the imperial capital—twenty years her senior—had been canceled. It seemed the house of Margrave Schutzenwald was searching for a suitable partner for her to continue the Aguinas line. Caroline had no objections to this, but apparently, she hoped to continue working as a chemist.

Though this meant Caroline couldn't contribute to new medicines or potions, this desire to work as a chemist was very like her, Mariela thought.

There was one problem. Since the incident with the potions never came to light, there was a possibility that aristocrats might make a pass at the newly single Caroline to obtain and inherit the rights to the family potions. In and around the Aguinas estate, Margrave Schutzenwald kept a watchful eye over her—dissuading people from trying anything. But that couldn't be said about a

shop for commoners, such as Sunlight's Canopy.

Caroline regretted dragging Mariela into the aforementioned matter and withdrew from Mariela's apothecary.

There's nothing for her to worry about. Mariela couldn't voice this aloud, even if those were her true feelings.

She hadn't been told the explicit details of the incident. In the cellar of the Aguinas family estate, she'd stumbled across rows of empty coffins and a woman slumbering in a glass case. Though she could piece together how the family had managed to supply potions over the past two hundred years, no one told her more about the new medicine in question.

Not that she was going to ask. The fact that she'd offered a helping hand to Caroline's father gave her a hunch that she'd gotten mixed up in something really bad.

Even though the nondisclosure agreement with the Labyrinth Suppression Forces was purely verbal—meaning she wasn't bound by a magical contract—Mariela had no intention of coming clean to anyone.

On that day, she'd ended up staying overnight at the Aguinas estate and was released the following morning. Lynx had arrived at Sunlight's Canopy right as Mariela and Sieg returned, face awash with relief.

"I got the news, but I couldn't stay still without seeing you in person."

Lynx was overjoyed that Mariela and Sieg were safe and didn't even mention that they couldn't make the delivery yesterday. Mariela could see they'd made him worried sick.

That's exactly why she couldn't say she wanted to keep making medicine with Caroline at Sunlight's Canopy. Her own ineptitude might cause Caroline trouble down the line, just as it had with Lynx.

As Mariela remained silent, Weishardt observed her and began to speak slowly.

"I regret that you were caught up in all of this, Mariela. The reality is there are those who now know that you're acquainted with Lady Caroline. It won't

matter if she actually frequents your shop; I'm sure some characters will resort to merciless measures to get what they want. For that, I have a proposal."

Mariela seemed thrown off-balance, convinced she'd be taken in by the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, even though she'd just now returned to her apothecary. But Weishardt's suggestion surprised her.

"Would you allow the medical engineer Nierenberg to open a branch of his clinic at Sunlight's Canopy?"

"Say what?"

Before Mariela could recover from her confusion, Weishardt had already launched into a full-blown pitch for Nierenberg.

"Nierenberg is the head of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces' medical team and a trusted friend of General Leonhardt. He's well-known among the people and holds a higher position than your average noble. I mean, if you think about it, unless there are extenuating circumstances, all noblemen in the Labyrinth City are required to serve in the military, which means most of the population would stand at attention just at the sight of him. On top of that, he is excellent at combat, particularly his antipersonnel skills. No man is more reliable than him as an escort. Furthermore, his principal occupation is a medical engineer, making him well versed in the human body. He knows exactly how much the body can take, and all his past agitators scamper off with their tails between their legs just from his presence. Ah yes, is that man over there your escort? I hope you pardon my rudeness, but don't his combat skills worry you? Take this opportunity and let Nierenberg train him. While Nierenberg is stationed here, your escort will be released from his duties, granting him more time to train by entering the Labyrinth. I think strengthening your defenses is a nice perk, Mariela. Hmm? You think Nierenberg's face is scary? Don't worry, he is kind to women. He has a very lovely daughter as well. She was a target in the recent incident, and she needs to be guarded significantly more than she is currently. I'm thinking of having her come to Sunlight's Canopy during the day. You know, really seize this opportunity. She's a very attentive young lady, and I believe she would jump right into helping you with the shop. I'm certain you can expect more customers when Nierenberg's clinic opens. The Labyrinth Suppression Forces will continue paying his wages, so I don't mind if you use the payments

for his medical services for the benefit of Sunlight's Canopy. Oh, maybe you think this is too good to be true. Maybe you're suspicious. Truth is, there is something I'd like to ask you, Mariela. You're an Alchemist Pact-Bearer with the *imperial capital*, correct? I believe that is why you realized Royce was possessed by Ruiz. There must be some reason for an alchemist with a pact in the *imperial capital* to come to a place where they *can't make potions*, and I have no intention of prying into your circumstances or engaging in other immoral practices. However, I'd like for you to lend us a little of your power. Oh, it's a small thing. You saw that Royce and Ruiz were blended together, and I'd like for you to find out if anything is blended with the soldiers of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces. They will come here to receive medical examinations from Nierenberg. Go about your daily life, make medicine with Lady Caroline, and converse with your customers. But every now and then, glance in their direction and see. Of course, we will cover the cost of the medical examinations. How's that?"

Mariela's tilted head remained glued to her shoulder, stretching her neck muscles on the opposite side. It was a pleasant sort of pain.

Usually, Sieg would straighten her neck for her, but he remained quietly behind her, as one would expect in front of the lieutenant general of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces. With no other choice, Mariela raised her head herself as she thought about the chaotic explanation.

Information overload...

All she knew for certain was that *she* hadn't been the one to label Nierenberg's face scary.

She looked at Weishardt, who had a calm, unreadable smile, and then the person next to him, who had the same expression. Nierenberg wasn't scary; he was...no, he was definitely scary.

But she was in the clear, since she didn't say it aloud! Mariela turned her gaze back to Weishardt. She knew this wasn't the right time to say "Pardon?" or "From up top, please."

"Um, does that mean Lady Carol and I can keep working here...?"

"Correct."

Even though it was obvious that she was bending to his will, Mariela thought everything would be fine if she could continue to live at Sunlight's Canopy. "I understand," she replied.

With that, the usual dwarven trio came the next day with the tools of their trade in hand. They remodeled the dining hall into Nierenberg's treatment room, added inner doors with an excessive number of magical locks on the second floor and a basement to prevent outsiders from trespassing, and remodeled the empty storage room into a large-capacity storehouse.

They seemed to have received quite a sum from the Labyrinth Suppression Forces as compensation.

"These state-of-the-art magical locks are used in important rooms in nobles' estates and simultaneously satisfy the contradictory aspects of crime prevention and usability. Plus, they're groundbreaking in..." Giddy from using expensive, modern fixtures, Johan yapped on about trivial facts.

Gordon disparaged his son as they continued to work. "Well then, we oughta use wood of the same caliber. Get a whiff of this! Treebeast wood from the Labyrinth just *smells* different!" He rubbed his cheek all over the fine wood.

Was he planning to coat the wood with his face oil instead of wax? It was particularly uncanny that the knots in the wood looked like human faces warped in disgust. And it was going to become a door in Sunlight's Canopy. Best not to polish it with secreted oils.

The glass artisan Ludan was drooling over the decorative tiles, marveling at them one by one. "That atelier makes quality stuff."

Mariela thought they were far from appropriate for Nierenberg's treatment room... Or was the intention to piece together a holy mosaic, forcing the soldiers to confront the afterlife? Just imagining quivering patients begging for divine mercy made Mariela wish that the dwarves would go lightly on these motifs.

For days afterward, Weishardt's winding speech (which was as good as gibberish to Mariela) had left her with a gaping mouth. Every time it involuntarily drooped open, Nierenberg's daughter Sherry giggled, cooing, "Miss Mariela, your mouth's open again" and popped in a piece of candy, which

promptly closed over it.



03



“Seems she acquiesced to my proposition.”

With Sunlight’s Canopy behind him, Weishardt was basking in a feeling of accomplishment for the first time in a while.

To not offend the sole Alchemist Pact-Bearer in the Labyrinth City, he’d personally made the trip to her apothecary. And of course, he wanted to see the girl called Mariela with his own eyes.

Even after he’d met with her again, Mariela still appeared to be an ordinary girl.

“What do you think?” he’d asked his aide.

Somewhat perplexed, the man replied, “She strikes me as unremarkable, but.....”

“I thought so. But as she watched me arrive at the shop, she grinned in amusement.”

Weishardt had certainly seen Mariela’s expression when he’d taken a seat in a chair. He knew how he presented to other people, weaponizing his appearance at the negotiation table. For this trip, he had cut down on the number of companions and traveled in disguise. But it should have still been impossible for a commoner to grin at Weishardt and his impressive crew as if they were a gang of circus animals—especially after they’d barged into her shop without warning.

Weishardt recalled the entirety of the discussion.

Guess there’s more to her than what meets the eye.

Without changing his expression, Weishardt had assessed Mariela’s tiny smile. This was, of course, without knowing he occupied the seat where Gordon the dwarf had lounged mere hours ago.

As he made his daily visit to Sunlight's Canopy, Gordon must have been attempting to cheer up Mariela, who was down in the dumps ever since Caroline refused to come to the shop.

"This seat is all mine. I'm gonna come 'ere tomorrow, too. Maybe I ought to mark it." As he rubbed his rump all over the chair, Gordon's eyes kept flicking over to Mariela.

"Stooooooooop iiiit!" she shrieked. "It's gonna get dirty! You're making it all stinky!" Mariela chucked a few rotten apriore fruits in his direction.

And Weishardt with the smile of a dazzling prince had settled down in the exact seat reeking of eau de Gordon.

Gordon's funk is gonna transfer onto Weishaaaardt...!

From his rump, on top of that.

Inevitably, her anxiety dissipated immediately. Even then, her stomach dropped after hearing from Weishardt's aide that Caroline may not come to Sunlight's Canopy anymore.

This isn't going well. We must have offended her by probing her.

With a bad feeling about the whole thing, Weishardt took over the negotiations and conveyed the items of importance in rapid succession.

To dispel her worries and improve her mood, Weishardt offered suggestions to all her problems without any prompting. It wouldn't be right to command her by utilizing his social position as a shield. He had to convey that they were considering her needs as the alchemist before anyone else's.

But as Weishardt continued to spin his propositions, Mariela's head tilted more and more toward her shoulder.

According to legend, the tyrannical ninth emperor would tilt his head to the side whenever a retainer offered an apology.

His head would return to its original position if he accepted the retainer's apology. Otherwise, he would draw a finger across his throat, signaling the retainer would lose his head. The eyes of the ninth emperor gazed into chaos, with no logic to be found within them.

The alchemist's eyes were the same as they bored vacantly into him, as though she knew nothing at all, and Weishardt was immediately reminded of this piece of historical trivia. He must have looked like a buffoon, rattling off his proposal, but this decision would sway the future of the Labyrinth City. He could not afford to fail.

Her command of military prowess was unclear. The Labyrinth Suppression Forces had a mission to protect her from fools, regardless of her power. Too low, and she might fall under the control of a nitwit. Too high, and she might threaten the safety of the Labyrinth City itself.

Stationing Nierenberg at her shop was their last resort—and their best move. It satisfied Mariela's desire to live in the City and Weishardt's intention to keep her there. With Nierenberg at Sunlight's Canopy, it would signal to all that Mariela had connections to the Labyrinth Suppression Forces. Plus, keeping her close would let them protect her from all sides.

Under the pretext of a medical exam, soldiers could be dispatched to her apothecary, where they could assess and treat lingering side effects from the black new medicine. Above all else, Weishardt needed to establish amicable relations with Mariela for the sake of subjugating the Labyrinth.

In terms of ability, no one was more qualified than Nierenberg. In terms of personality, however, Weishardt had some concerns...

With her neck twisted enough to touch her shoulder, Mariela's head snapped back to its original position.

"Um, does that mean Lady Carol and I can keep working here...?"

"Correct," Weishardt answered immediately.

He wasn't going to be fooled by her confused expression. After all, she was an alchemist capable of banging out a ton of potions. According to the information from his intelligence operatives, she'd immediately answered all the questions from Elmera, chairwoman of the Medicinal Herbs Division, without consulting her Library. There was no way someone with that level of intelligence couldn't understand his speech.

Long story short, her response was: "If anyone interferes with my way of life,

get rid of 'em.”

Which meant it was worth their time to push their agenda on a Pact-Bearer “from the imperial capital.” Their respective interests seemed to align. He would arrange for a carpenter right away to remodel a corner of Sunlight’s Canopy into a clinic. And commission interior doors with advanced magical locks to heighten the confidentiality of the manufacture and transport of the potions.

That was Weishardt’s thought process. But when he received reports that “Sherry’s been tossing candy into Mariela’s mouth” a few days after the grand opening, Weishardt almost fell to his knees. If it wasn’t for the supplementary comment that “Mariela’s enjoying Caroline and Sherry’s company,” he wouldn’t have been able to keep standing.

After that, Merle of Merle’s Spices began to deliver a variety of treats as “samples” when dropping off her usual tea leaves to Sunlight’s Canopy, but Mariela didn’t know what prompted this change.



04



“Good day, Miss Mar...”

Lieutenant Malraux of the Black Iron Freight Corps had opened the door to Sunlight’s Canopy.

“Oh, Mr. Malraux, what a treat. Wel—”

Before Mariela could say “Welcome,” Malraux slammed the door shut without stepping foot in the shop.

“Um, Mr. Malraux?!” Mariela scrambled outside.

“Wh...wh-wh-wh-why is Dr. Nierenberg here?!”

Real smooth. Just as Weishardt had explained, Nierenberg made an outstanding watchdog. He was a little *too* good, making allies run for dear life

just as easily as enemies.

“Is that you, Malraux? Come in,” Nierenberg said as if it were his own shop.

“Damn you, Lynx.....,” Malraux muttered under his breath to prevent Nierenberg from hearing him as he was ushered into Sunlight’s Canopy. Lynx had failed to fill him in.

Incidentally, only those who schemed to meddle with Caroline and soldiers of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces were petrified of Nierenberg. But because he had a considerate side, the customers of Sunlight’s Canopy had gotten used to him in no time.

“My lower back...,” one would begin to complain.

“Hrm, apply this medicine after a bath,” the doctor would reply, “and it should feel better.”

“Doctor, my child...”

“Mm, it’s just a cold. But her coughing seems painful. Have her take this medicine in addition to the antipyretic.”

With a gaggle of girls from Sunlight’s Canopy freely engaging with him, the adults must have decided that the only scary thing about Nierenberg was his face.

But for mothers to console their sobbing children with assurances that he only *looked* unkind? That’s what one called reckless behavior.

Nierenberg wasn’t just knowledgeable about injuries, but also the diseases and illnesses that came with old age, which Caroline and Mariela could learn from. Caroline was particularly proactive, discussing ideas for new medicines with him to make more.

Of course, not all their customers were friendly. Just as Weishardt said, nosy nobles and meddlesome merchants came to visit after Caroline’s engagement was called off.

“In a dirty shop like th.....*iiiiis*?!”

“Well, well, Caro.....*liiiiine*?!”

Unlike customers seeking medicine, all those trying to court Caroline had connections, meaning they knew about the doctor. As soon as they swung open the door to Sunlight's Canopy and got an eyeful of Nierenberg, they shrieked in peculiar voices and scrambled home.

There were others who plotted violence against Mariela and Caroline, but they were systematically purged through the efforts of the intelligence unit and the Black Iron Freight Corps under Weishardt's command. Thanks to this, the Labyrinth City became a little less unsavory, though Mariela seemed blissfully unaware of it.

Nierenberg exhibited a kind of invincibility.

"Erm, Dr. Nierenberg," Malraux timidly ventured, "I have some business with Miss Mariela."

"Perhaps I can help, Malraux. What is it?"

It was rare for Malraux to have business in broad daylight, seeing as he usually conducted it in secret through nighttime potion deliveries or packages containing Lynx's lunch.

"The truth is, Dick and Amber are going to be married."

Were they, now? It seemed love had finally blossomed for Captain Dick.

After a successful proposal, the groom-to-be had left in high spirits for the imperial capital on business for the Black Iron Freight Corps, leaving Malraux to invite Mariela and company in his place.

"When this job's done, I'm getting married," Dick had announced with glee, which was honestly just *asking* for fate to play a cruel trick on him.

And yet, according to information that Malraux received, Captain Dick had sped through the Fell Forest at an even faster pace than usual, which earned him a scolding from Yuric ("Don't overwork the raptors, okay?"). Malraux just wanted him to drive safely. After all, Amber wasn't going to run away. Probably.

"Oh-ho, are you saying this news doesn't concern me?"

"N...n-n-no, of course, you too! He would love for you to attend!"

Nierenberg's glasses glinted, and Malraux hastily waved both hands in front of

himself. The two beautiful girls, Caroline and Sherry, came to see what the fuss was about. Upon hearing there would be a wedding, they grew giddy with excitement, dreaming of the dress of the bride-to-be, as was typical for their age.

“How wonderful. There is to be a wedding!”

“Wow, I wanna go, too! Is that okay, Papa?”

What kind of food will they be serving?! Mariela found herself wondering, momentarily swept up in the excitement herself, but all she ultimately contributed to the conversation were a few awkward comments. “O-oh. Sounds fun!”



05



“A-Amberrrrr, I give you this lance!”

“I don’t need a broken old stick.”

Apparently, this unfortunate exchange would forever be Captain Dick’s proposal story.

“But y’know, the captain stayed up all night coming up with this,” explained Lynx, dressed in nice clothes with his hair stylishly smoothed down. He was acting out the entire proposal.

Lynx had apparently made full use of his shadowmaster skills and the scouting abilities he’d honed during his time with the Black Iron Freight Corps to infiltrate this intimate moment.

It was a complete waste of his talents.

“From this day forward, I shall protect you with this lance!”

Dick’s lance had been his closest partner until now, had seen him through the deaths of his comrades—and Amber had rejected it. With tears welling in his eyes, he’d soldiered on with his proposal instead of shrinking from her

dismissal.

“What are you talking about? Haven’t you always protected me? You’re more important to me than a lance.” With this, Amber had taken Captain Dick’s free hand.

She would have chosen him even if he weren’t an A-Rank spear user, even though he was hardly a fighter at all. Upon hearing this, Dick allegedly teared up like a maiden in the midst of a proposal—a pure young boy masquerading as a stoic block of a man coming in at six feet five.

“Miss Amber. A true gentleman,” murmured Caroline in admiration.

“And she’s smooth!” Sherry chirped in agreement, taking a jab at Dick.

“That’s Amber for ya,” Mariela added, nodding with respect, though it was painfully obvious that she hardly understood any of this conversation. No doubt she was nodding only because she could tell it was what she was expected to do.

Although their comments were slightly off, the three girls just got one another. The trio had donned their best dresses and gotten their hair coiffed, making themselves especially lovely for the small party for acquaintances. Including the itty-bitty girl, of course. With the help of some liquid courage, one might even say they were models. If someone compared them to flowers blooming in the Labyrinth City, no one would deny it.

But even the three pretty girls were no match for the lady of the hour.

Rather than her usual lascivious red dress with its plunging neckline, Amber wore a white dress that covered up everything to the base of her neck. She looked more beautiful and joyous than anyone else. Well, there was one other person who looked happier: the leading man, Captain Dick. When he saw Amber in her wedding gown, he covered his mouth with both hands and secretly wiped away tears.

What’s with that girly reaction...? There was no doubt everyone present thought the same thing.

It was an unimaginably romantic atmosphere for a man who both gallantly mowed down monsters in the Fell Forest and wretchedly massaged cushions in

drunken stupors. Now he was positively melting and beaming in a perfect depiction of happiness that made you want to go “Aww.”

Dick and Amber’s wedding was a casual affair at the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion and open to the public. The news had traveled through word of mouth, and Black Iron Freight Corps customers and former colleagues from the Labyrinth Suppression Forces came one after another, turning it into a huge party before anyone realized it.

In the Labyrinth City, many of the weddings between commoners were public—following a tradition that said the couple’s happiness corresponded to the number of attendees in celebration. The place was crammed with Amber’s acquaintances from Sunlight’s Canopy, including Caroline and Sherry, who had come bearing gifts.

Incidentally, the face of Sunlight’s Canopy, Emily, wore many hats at the wedding: She attended to the bride, served food, cleared away plates, and even helped in the kitchen. That meant she didn’t have time to enjoy the party. On the other hand, the sight of Emily trotting around in her cutest clothes entertained men who liked that kind of thing, creating new clientele for Sunlight’s Canopy.

There was a stream of men who would have called out to the three pretty girls drawing so much attention at the celebration. Except the moment they saw who was behind the girls, every one of them whipped their heads in the other direction. After all, Nierenberg, Caroline’s escort, and Sieg were keeping a watchful eye on the girls, radiating a murderous vibe that didn’t go well with the celebratory occasion.

Although the aforementioned girls didn’t meet new people thanks to that invisible barrier, they giggled with excitement at Lynx’s reenactment, a mission that he dubbed “Infiltrate! Captain Dick’s Proposal.” With their mouths full of the owner’s best dishes, including one with peculiar large-mouthed fish native to the Labyrinth that the Labyrinth Suppression Forces had brought, they were just peachy.

In the middle of the freezing winter, the heartwarming feast continued until dawn, even after Mariela and the others had returned home.

As Dick received the endless well-wishers, he recalled the time he first realized Amber was a special woman, back when they were both teenagers.

“Hey, cow girl! *Moo!*”



“Shaddap, or I’ll punt ya ass!”

“Gah, don’t say that after you’ve kicked me!”

“Ahhhh, leave Amber alone!!”

“Whoa, Dick, you’re taking it too far!”

It was your typical story. Dick and Amber grew up in the same orphanage. Amber was a year older than Dick, and the big-hearted, strong-willed girl and the brute of a boy were like siblings. Every time a bully mocked Amber for being an early bloomer, Dick would come running no matter where he was.

Though as a general rule, Amber had usually solved the problem on her own before Dick barged in.

Looking back on it now, it was obvious he had started to get riled up whenever anyone made fun of her around that time—even though he couldn’t put a finger on why.

When they left the orphanage, Amber had gone to work at a store, making the most of her low-level Person Appraisal skill, while Dick entered the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, utilizing his competencies in handling a spear. At a lower skill level, Amber had found it difficult to suss out the detail of someone’s skills, though she could form a general idea of their personality, preferences, and opinions. Sales boomed under her customer service, calling attention to her skills.

Meanwhile, Dick had been lauded for his lance-work. And though he was a young commoner, he was promoted to captain in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces under Leonhardt, who understood his capabilities.

Even with their packed schedules, Dick and Amber slipped away for secret dates in their spare time. Dick was a handful for her to deal with, always fumbling around with attempts at sweet talk. Amber looked after him and his blunders, and their relationship gradually changed from siblings to something more.

The story of Amber’s love life was nothing new: An aristocrat with a bad reputation from the imperial capital had courted Amber, who was at her prime

in both beauty and business.

This aristocrat went by Sequoias, the new colonel of the City Defense Squad. This placed both his social status and position higher than Dick's.

There are many iterations of this same story in legends and plays. Under the pretense of a business discussion, Sequoias had invited Amber to his private room in the City Defense Squad, and upon hearing the news, Dick had rushed over.

Well, it would be awfully cliché, save for Sequoias lying unconscious in an awkward position near Amber when Dick arrived to the scene, bits of a shattered vase scattered on the floor.

Amber had always had a bit of a wild side.

As a general rule, Amber had usually solved the problem on her own before Dick barged in. This time was no exception. She'd not only secured evidence of Sequoias's attempt to do something nasty to her with a magical recording tool, but she'd slammed him with a solid kick in self-defense.

"The vase fell in the struggle. I obviously didn't hit him with it," explained Amber to reassure Dick, laughing as she retold the entire story.

She'd managed to beat Sequoias in a good old-fashioned fight with her hands and feet. Sequoias might have neglected to train, but Amber would have overpowered him regardless. With proof of the incident, Sequoias's indiscretion was exposed under General Leonhardt's charge, and the whole thing was wrapped up as a big joke.

However, after Sequoias left the Labyrinth City, a supposed representative demanded compensation for the broken vase.

"You're telling me that vase was worth a hundred gold coins?"

It had to be some cheap vase liberally used in corners of any room. That's why they'd left it as it was. But the magical recorder had captured the noise of a vase shattering, proving that something was broken during the encounter.

With declaration magic, Sequoias's representative testified to seeing "the fragments of a vase valued at one hundred gold coins." Which meant it couldn't

have been a lie. That said, there was no proof that the pieces seen by the representative were from the vase Amber had broken. It was clear he'd made his testimony after coming across a totally different expensive vase.

This accusation could have been invalidated had Amber denied those claims with declaration magic. But her request to see those fragments to verify whether they were from the same vase never came to fruition.

That was because Sequoias had fallen to his demise in a ravine between the imperial capital and Labyrinth City after he'd been expelled from his job and entrusted his affairs to his representative.

Even though he'd been a tough one to handle, a noble family had lost their successor, and they were up against a daughter of a commoner.

After their son died in disgrace, they would never withdraw quietly. The representative stated if Amber paid a hundred gold coins as recompense for the vase, he wouldn't cause any more trouble for her. This seemed a reasonable compromise to Amber. Technically, it would take a commoner a span of a lifetime to scrounge up one hundred gold coins. With no relatives or support system, it would be impossible for Amber to pay that sum. In other words, the family was saying that they'd call it even if Amber offered up herself.

Leonhardt had intervened because Dick was a commanding officer of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces. Although Amber and Dick had grown up like siblings, they were completely unrelated by blood.

More than anything else, Amber didn't want to crush Dick's future after he'd been promoted to captain of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces from his humble beginnings as an orphan.

"I won't cause him any more trouble."

Without consulting with Dick, Amber planned to raise the hundred gold coins by herself.

It was a tale as old as time. Neither youth nor beauty could help her scrape together one hundred gold coins. Amber had expected a life of indentured servitude, but she had forgotten one critical thing—that Dick would come running whenever she was in trouble.

“I promise to pay it back.”

Just as Amber was on the verge of becoming a lifelong slave, Dick had appeared, grumbling to the slave trader and making a suitable interest payment, and succeeded in preventing Amber from becoming a debt laborer.

But the salary of a commanding officer of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces wasn't enough to pay the interest. In front of the troubled officer appeared someone with “an idea,” Malraux, another commanding officer of the Forces. His idea of forming the Black Iron Freight Corps was a godsend.

Has it really been almost ten years since I left the Labyrinth Suppression Forces...?

Malraux brought a bottle of wine for Dick, who was thinking back on that day with nostalgia.

“Congratulations, Dick. Welcome to married life.” Malraux waggled his eyebrows and laughed impishly.

“...Don't jinx it.” Dick flashed him a wry smile.

It was rare to see Malraux with an expression like that. Proof he was in a good mood. He must have been delighted by Dick's marriage.

“Malraux, it's all thanks to you.”

“No, if Miss Mariela hadn't appeared, you probably wouldn't have been able to raise that sum in a short period of time.”

Amid the hustle and bustle of the celebratory feast, the two close friends exchanged words at a volume no one else could hear.

Ever since the incident with the Aguinas family, the number of people who'd been searching for Caroline—and Mariela—had only increased. The compensation the Black Iron Freight Corps received corresponded to their work, including that purge. But regardless of the money, Mariela was the reason he was blessed with this wonderful opportunity. Dick couldn't thank her enough.

If Mariela hadn't appeared before the Black Iron Freight Corps, if she hadn't entrusted the buying and selling of potions to them, Amber would never have

been a free woman again.

“What will you do from here on out? I don’t mind if you leave the Black Iron Freight Corps. After all, you achieved your goal.”

It wasn’t as if Malraux had formed the Black Iron Freight Corps with the sole purpose of helping Dick. He’d had his own reasons for leaving the Labyrinth Suppression Forces and forming the Corps. And the circumstances leading to it hadn’t been resolved yet.

Even then, he’d congratulated Dick, claiming he wouldn’t mind if he left the Black Iron Freight Corps to pursue his own happiness.

This blessing reaffirmed Dick’s belief that Malraux was an even rarer type than Mariela. Although they were more or less polar opposites, Dick considered Malraux an incomparable friend.

“Either way, that won’t happen for a while. There are still werewolves cropping up on the road every now and then. I don’t think I can leave them to those guys.”

Although it didn’t breach the contract of confidentiality between the Black Iron Freight Corps and Mariela, Mariela’s existence had become known to Weishardt. The first purge of the turbulent group had been completed. Mariela would continue to make potions from here on out. If monster-warding potions began to circulate on the market, the main road in the Fell Forest used by the Black Iron Freight Corps would become a real trade route again for the first time in two hundred years. It would be bustling with people and goods.

It was certain the situation surrounding the Labyrinth City would change greatly in the future.

“Well, you know what they say. She might find you annoying if you’re all over her all the time when she’s used to being long distance.”

“...I told you not to jinx my marriage.”

Even when they exchanged few words, they seemed to have an inherent understanding of each other.

Together with his friend, the drinks that night tasted better than any he’d

ever had before. He sipped the alcohol poured for him by the endless guests who'd come to celebrate with him, drinking to his heart's content.

All while neglecting his new bride.

Absolutely hammered at the banquet hall, Dick was shameless to a whole new level. In fact, it was said Amber didn't let him in their new home until the next time he returned to the Labyrinth City.

"This is because of all the things you said, Malraux..."

Dick shifted the entirety of the blame to his friend, who roared with laughter as he taught him the secrets of making up.

CHAPTER 1

Paradise





01



“Welcome in! Here’s your usual medicine. Dr. Nierenberg is coming today. Would you like to see him?”

“Welcome! I recommend the *uni-corn* tea.”

After Captain Dick’s wedding, a stunning woman and a little girl had joined Sunlight’s Canopy.

They were the daytime and nighttime poster girls for the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion, Amber and Emily. Mariela fretted over the financial situation of the Pavilion without its two biggest allures. But with an around-the-clock contest between the other employees vying to secure Amber’s position as the top earner for themselves, sales had actually increased. Erotigan—er, *Edgan* sometimes came with useless tidbits about how so-and-so was a real cutie and what he’d given her this time. He was one of the important customers driving profits at the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion. With the girl in question never the same, Sieg began to jot down the dates, names, and details of their conversations in a notebook, which turned into an unofficial “Observational Diary of Erotigan.”

Whatever. The real question was whether it was okay for Amber to start working again right after getting married. After all, she’d been working forever, and Mariela asked if she’d considered taking a little break.

“Well, Dick’s not here much, and I get so bored. I may not look like it, but I’m a whiz at bookkeeping!” boasted the unsolicited employee with unrivaled beauty, puffing up her chest with pride.

Apparently, waiting quietly at home wasn’t an option for her. Plus, she was a boss at math. The finances at Sunlight’s Canopy were all over the place, but maybe they would become as tight and taut as Amber’s figure—monitored and whipped into shape. Incidentally, the valley trailing between her huge twin

peaks was concealed with a sweater sporting a high neckline. But it was only human to be curious about secret places. There was no doubt her stretched sweater inspired heated emotions in the hearts of aspiring “mountaineers.”

“Hey, Sherry! Come and play!”

With Nierenberg’s daughter coming to Sunlight’s Canopy on the regular, Emily started to stop by more frequently, excited to make a friend close in age. She must have sprinted through the frigid air upon finishing her work at the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion. With reddened cheeks and ears, Emily gave her recommendation for uni-corn tea to the customers before running over to Sherry.

“Oh, Emily, your ribbon is all crooked again. Wow, your cheeks are cold.”

After Sherry covered Emily’s cheeks with both hands to warm them, she retied her hair for her.

A heartwarming sight. Even “mountaineers” couldn’t help seeking a life closer to home.

“A new magical tool was delivered.”

“Wow! What’s this do?! What’s this?!” chirped Mariela to Carol, who had more than enough potential to surpass the medical skills of the cheery commoner.

One was a sheltered flower, while the other was a roadside blossom raised in the Fell Forest. With different strengths, both were in demand.

There were prime pickings ranging from young girls to beautiful women—flowers raised on the side of a road to the peak of a mountain. It was a harem. Where was their king?

Ker-chak.

“Amber! I’m sor—”

Slam.

Captain Dick must have come to pick up Amber, but he’d shut the door upon seeing Nierenberg in his place of honor in Sunlight’s Canopy. Not the king of the harem, huh?

This reaction had become second nature—whether it was nobles making a pass at Carol, Lieutenant Malraux and his guilty conscience, or soldiers from the Labyrinth Suppression Forces coming in for medical examinations. Everyone opened and then shut and then reopened the door again. Mariela wished they would just come in the first time. They were letting in the cold air!

The only people occupying Sunlight's Canopy were the itty-bitty girls, regular customers soaking in sunlight like plants, and Nierenberg, the monster-warding statue. Although there was technically a harem, no one bothered the itty-bitty girls. They could be as carefree and lazy as they wanted. It might be more accurate to call it paradise than a harem.

That's right: Neither Sieg nor Lynx were currently in Sunlight's Canopy.

"Oh, Mr. Dick. Why are you out here in the cold?"

Another customer had arrived—a soldier who'd come for a medical examination.

Ker-chak. Slam.

Why did he shut the door...?

It might as well be a ritual for visiting the monster-warding statue. A sacred tree might be growing here, but that didn't make it a sacred place.

"H-hello?" This time, the soldier from the Labyrinth Suppression Forces managed to step inside. Captain Dick tried to sneak in behind him, but his hunkering body wasn't hidden at all.

With a huge sigh, Amber quipped, "Dick, over here. I've got heavy luggage," and led him to it.

"Leave it to me," Captain Dick boasted, trying to look cool as he scampered after Amber. He didn't look cool at all, but he certainly did look very happy.

"The examination room is in the back."

If Dick had eagerly received a one-way ticket to heaven with Amber, the other soldier looked as if he was being dragged to hell as Nierenberg led him away.

Mariela couldn't put her finger on why the soldiers adopted these expressions. Weren't Nierenberg's examinations nothing out of the ordinary?

After all, Mariela had gone for a visit with him, and he'd simply given her a tune-up by pressing the parts of her body that had grown stiff to encourage stagnant blood to flow. Although Sieg had groaned, it hadn't hurt Mariela at all. This might be attributed to the fact that she chugged Drops of Life on the daily—it was too much of a hassle to draw up water. This was why she never had any knots or poor blood flow. In fact, her entire body was all flab and squish, but the person in question didn't notice at all.

Oh, that man...

When the visit was over, Nierenberg handed the soldier's medical record to Mariela. She stuffed the applicable medicine into a bag and wrote something at the end of the record.

The soldier who'd just been examined was a little unsteady on his feet as he returned to the shop. After taking his medicine and drinking some tea, he went home.

Emily had told him it was called *uni-corn* tea, and he looked so happy drinking it that he would never again be able to use the word *corn* without a *uni-* in front.

A few days later, the soldiers requiring medical treatment, including him, were notified of a change in post.

"You're ordered to recuperate for one week in the Ahriman Springs."

They received complimentary tickets for a trip to the hot springs in snow country, known as the Polar Bootcamp from Hell.

The Ahriman Springs.

A hot spring that gushed forth on one of the mountains towering over the northwestern section of the Labyrinth City, Mount Ahriman. It was known for its high content of Drops of Life. Mount Ahriman was steep, but its springs were close to the Labyrinth City, and it flourished in the time of the Kingdom of Endalsia as a day spa.

Ever since the Stampede, the amount of spring water had been halved, and monkey monsters had begun to inhabit the area, known as needle apes because their fur resembled metal needles. A huge horde of the creatures that

loved hot springs congregated there in the winter season, preventing people from getting too close. Needle apes were B-Rank monsters, and they were most dangerous in wooded areas.

On top of that, the poor footing and cold temperatures of winter created additional hurdles. Who wanted to fight needle apes under those conditions? Only the devil would issue this command. It was way beyond human scope.

“Grar-rar-ar-aaaar!” shrieked the needle apes as if to intimidate the human trespassers... Well, it might have been more accurate to compare their screams to squealing laughter, making fun of the miserable humans forcibly thrown into this situation by Nierenberg. Since needle apes were monsters, they didn’t stop at intimidation, using trees as footholds to begin their assault. If the humans didn’t desperately fight back on this unfamiliar terrain, they would be devoured in an instant.

The three men facing the needle apes in Mount Ahriman in the middle of winter had no time to even shiver from the cold.

“Why...? Why me...?”

“Get over it, Ed.”

“...Mariela...”

Edgan, Lynx, and Siegmund seemed to be linked by fate to the snowy country.

Their current situation warding off the needle apes could be attributed to an off-the-cuff statement made by Mariela.

“What? Treatment for impurities in the body? A hot spring might be good for that.”

More than underground water, hot springs were saturated with Drops of Life. Mariela’s master had told her that they could improve circulation and flush toxins from the body. Plus, skin would become baby smooth. Though Mariela had never been to a hot spring, her master called Ahriman Springs paradise—verdant scenery, scrumptious food, and steamy waters—causing Mariela to worship it in all the wrong ways. She was totally convinced that paradise was a party venue, tables lined with meat, meat, and more meat. Well, according to her standards, she wasn’t entirely wrong.

She'd whined about going to Ahriman Springs.

"Ahriman Springs is a paradise for monkeys," Sieg had warned.

"It's too dangerous to climb snowy mountains," Lynx tried to convince her unsuccessfully.

"Needle apes, eh? Might make the ideal opponent."

The Ahriman Springs seemed to have flipped a switch—or hit an acupuncture point—in Sunlight's Canopy's resident monster-warder, Nierenberg.

"If we can exterminate the needle apes in the winter, it may be possible to travel to the hot springs in the spring," he suggested.

Between Mariela's desire to go to a hot spring and Sieg's desire to go to a hot spring with Mariela, it was enough grounds to officially decide to subjugate the needle apes. Lynx and Edgan were just unlucky enough to be present at the time and got roped into the whole debacle.

Dick and Malraux of the Black Iron Freight Corps had initially lent an ear to Lynx and Edgan's objections.

"Be grateful that they'll get better at combat," argued Nierenberg, to which they raised both hands and sent the young men off. If Nierenberg was telling them to be grateful, they would do it. After all, he'd been the one who'd thoroughly looked after them during their time in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces. What outstanding yes-men. Old habits are hard to break.

That said, between the three of them, only Edgan had been categorized as a B-Rank from strength alone. Lynx was only a B-Rank with his shadowmaster abilities, which were really more geared toward scouting, and Sieg had lost his Spirit Sight, dropping his status to C Rank. With just the three of them, fighting one B-Rank needle ape was a challenge. But a whole herd of them in the snowy mountains? That was suicide. And because this was for training, they couldn't use monster-warding potions.

In a moment, they were surrounded by needle apes, attacking from all directions. Their namesake fur was as stiff as metal needles, and crude strikes would not be enough to pierce it. It might have been a different story for Dick, whose spear could drive through cheap armor, or Donnino with his hammer.

But the trio's respective weapon proficiencies were in short swords, dual swords, and long swords. They might have differed in length, but in the end, they were all weapons that relied on technique more than power. And the only way to overcome this monster was by jabbing the blade at the same angle as the fur grew or aiming at places with sparse fur, including its face.

"Geez! Quit moving around! Sieg! Use a bow! Aren't you an archer?!"

"When I could rely on my Spirit Sight! I can't hit anything with a bow now! Hey, Lynx!"

"Didn't *you* say a bow wasn't suited for a guard?!"

"Oh, that one's a girl, so I can't exactly kill her..."

"Ed! Don't ease up on them!"

"Edgan! Mixed bathing! Mixed bathing with Belisa is waiting for you!"

"Seriously? Can't wait for a day in bath-topia..."

Erotigan's favorite smut might feature the international paradise of mixed outdoor baths, but there was no such practice in the territory of Margrave Schutzenwald. Even if the Ahriman Springs could be redeveloped, those with social status would rent private rooms, and commoners would be segregated by gender into large baths. And obviously, they would be indoors. It would be unwise to soak in an open-air bath where monsters were present.

"Wait for meee, Joanna!"

"Not Belisa?"

"Oh, she was the one before."

Apparently, Edgan's gill gem present was in vain, and his affections remained unrequited. Swinging his dual swords, the indomitable man redirected his persistence to fighting the needle apes in front of him. Encouraged by their gallant friend, Sieg and Lynx boldly stood against the swarm of needle apes.

Needle apes used tools, picking up stones to chuck or breaking off branches to use as weapons, for instance. Perhaps it was a small mercy that no rocks were exposed in the snow, which meant no stone throwing. If that hadn't been the case, the trio would have probably been defeated without much of a fight

at all.

But in their battle against needle apes ranking the same or above them, logical arguments that the humans were at an obvious disadvantage wasn't going to get them anywhere. The snow tripped them up, and all the trio could do was dodge the needle apes springing at them while slashing at the monsters.

The trio's stamina had been exhausted. It was the moment when the needle apes' fangs were going for Lynx's windpipe, Edgan's guts, and Sieg's remaining eye.

"And that's a wrap for today!" boomed the boss of the needle apes.

Wait! It was Haage, clad in fur. Even his head was shrouded by a hood. For an instant, he was unrecognizable.

Not that they could only identify him by his head. Under his fuzzy hood, Haage appeared 10 percent manlier than usual. It must have been because they were in a crisis in a snowcapped mountain. It definitely wasn't an effect of this hood. It obviously had to be an effect of the background.

Haage zipped between the trees with apish movements and began systematically sending needle apes flying with kicks. The needle apes couldn't follow the movements of the man who could find a foothold anywhere, even in the side of a tree, and they were forced to retreat deep into the mountains like sheep driven by a shepherd. Haage aimed his blows so they landed on the soft snow. Without sustaining any major injuries, the apes quickly regained consciousness and followed their retreating brethren.

Needle apes were smart. They knew a formidable foe had appeared. Maybe his kindness had been communicated to them from his soft kicks. Just as you'd expect from the boss monkey—er, *Haage*. The female needle apes cast lustful eyes at him before reluctantly withdrawing.

"You might as well have culled 'em. Why didn't you?"

"I was extra careful to make sure you can still train!"

It had been far from a close match for the three men; the needle apes had almost left them dead. As one who was powerful enough to make the monsters scramble, Haage's response was unexpectedly sensible.

With the added benefit of training, Sieg and the others had been told to subjugate the needle apes, but it wasn't as if they had no support. Weishardt had requested aid for them from the Adventurers Guild. He'd paid a sizable retaining fee for the top brass that the Adventurers Guild's guildmaster, Haage, had trained, but the man himself had been dispatched instead to ensure the trio could train with efficiency.

"Why has the guildmaster butted in...?"

"Ha-ha-ha. The staff members of the Adventurers Guild are top class! If we're missing two or three of them, it hampers everyone else's work!"

"And you're saying an absent guildmaster is no problem?"

"That'll be our little secret!" Haage flashed his teeth and gave his signature snappy thumbs-up, but with a little less energy than usual.

It may have been because every last staff member of the Adventurers Guild had said nothing except that he was "qualified."

"Someone come with me!"

"You're qualified."

"I've got classes to teach, you know?"

"You're qualified."

"By the way, maybe we could all have lunch together today..."

"You're qualified."

"...I'll handle the Mount Ahriman request."

"Take care, Guildmaster!"

This last line was said in perfect unison. It was their finest teamwork. It only served to attract attention to the man they were ostracizing.

Now that it's come to this, I'll use every possible method to restore the Ahriman Springs, and then all of Team Haage will take a vacation together!

In his mind, Haage forced a snappy thumbs-up.





Mount Ahriman housed a number of hot springs relatively close to the Labyrinth City. Two hundred years prior, it had recreational facilities that utilized the hot springs. Though the region didn't sustain damage from the Stampede, it had been abandoned for a long time, meaning the facilities had deteriorated from the gas in the hot springs and were missing their roofs, which had been crushed under the weight of snow.

Sieg and the rest stayed overnight in a temporary tent.

They'd had a tough time from the get-go. They were glad they'd thrown a small barrel of monster-warding potions prepared by the Labyrinth Suppression Forces into their hot spring of choice to drive out needle apes relaxing in the water.

These low-grade monster-warding potions were odorless to humans, but they emitted an unbearably bad smell to monsters. From the needle apes' point of view, it was like filthy water had been dumped into their usual spot.

In an instant, their paradise had completely transformed into a pool of foul water. The surroundings were saturated with a horrible odor that blended with the rising steam, and they couldn't even get close. The dirty water soaked their fur to the core, and there was no doubt the stench wafting from their bodies hadn't abated at all.

Imagine marveling, "What a great hot spring waterfall" and then experiencing the shock of turning your head to realize the water was coming from a drunken old man doing something very crude. If someone displayed that kind of behavior...

"ROOOOOAR! GRA-AR-RARG!!!"

It was no wonder the needle apes tried to slaughter that person in a fit of rage.

The needle apes were smart. They knew Sieg, Lynx, and Edgan were the ones who'd transformed their paradise into a pungent nightmare swamp. The trio

had wanted to run away from the creatures approaching with furious squawks and bloodshot eyes. But between the needle apes and Nierenberg, the latter was more frightening for sure.

Standing their ground, the three were locked in a relentless fight to the death, pushing back on the needle apes in the hellish landscape named Ahriman Springs.

The soldiers from the Labyrinth Suppression Forces who had “won” tickets for a day trip to the hot springs—or more accurately, the Polar Bootcamp from Hell—filed in, enclosing the area around the hot springs with fencing. By planting bromominthra and daigis, they were able to prevent monsters from invading their secured zone. With the needle apes pummeling Sieg’s group at all hours, they could catch their breath only while the soldiers were doing their thing: receiving medical attention from healers, eating food that the soldiers brought, and sleeping like logs. Since they secretly took the Regen medicine from Mariela, the three were getting better at abnormal speeds, but with every new day bringing brutal challenges, they didn’t even have the energy to notice.

All the soldiers from the Labyrinth Suppression Forces were on a day trip. Once their duties were finished, they rested in the hot spring for no time at all before trudging down the snowy slopes. They were tasked with lugging up resources to restore Ahriman Springs without ever staying overnight. Even with all their training in the Labyrinth, it was no easy feat.

From morning to evening, the soldiers were being worked to the bone for a few dozen minutes of respite in the hot springs. Though they were essentially married to their jobs, they fantasized about soft and fair skin emerging from the steam on the other side. Except the only women in these parts were the needle apes. And all of them were madly in love with Haage.

On top of that, they couldn’t even enjoy a meal served by a cute waitress—they departed the Labyrinth City before sunrise and returned late at night. Across from other rugged men, they scarfed down their three meals, which were gross, preserved pouches to boot.

The effects of the “new medicine” gradually waned thanks to the hot spring treatment, though the oblivious men were beginning to have doubts about the

whole thing. All they knew was that their energy was being sapped along with their psyches. The hot springs might have made their skin baby smooth, but their hearts were beginning to dry out and crack.

“At least we can sleep in our own beds at night,” said the soldiers at the Ahriman Springs, reciting their new group mantra.

Then what crimes had Sieg’s group committed to be subjected to this punishment? Other than the short span that the Labyrinth Suppression Forces were present, they’d been forced to put up a fight day and night. Only Haage was there to cast his gentle eyes on them, gazing at the battered group with the affection you might have for little children. From their perspective, it’s not hard to see how this could be incredibly grating. Forced to spend every waking minute with Haage and shoo away the jealous female monkeys, the three felt the soldiers of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces definitely had it better.

According to the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, the trio were the bottom-feeders in the social hierarchy at the Ahriman Springs.

“Heeey, Sieg! Any other exciting stories from your life shackled up with a girl?”

“Shut up and eat your food, Edgan.”

“What if I don’t wanna? It’s always the same old junk. Tell me a story to spice up my dinner.”

“Dinner, huh? Mariela always whips up some pretty good stuff.”

“Sure, but she can really only follow a recipe, Lynx.”

“Hmm? Is she bad at tweaking recipes?”

“‘Bad’ doesn’t even begin to cover it... I think it was last month when an adventurer handed Mariela a small gift. She might not look it, but she’s pursued by plenty of men.”

“She’s *what*?!”

Lynx was hooked now, and Sieg continued his story.

Adventurers were familiar with consumable goods—including medicine and smoke bombs. Now that the chemists were all-around better and the differences in quality had become negligible, it was possible to buy items for the

same price at the shop run by the Adventurers Guild near the entrance to the Labyrinth. In most circumstances, the adventurers stopped by at the shop to purchase those goods while selling the materials they'd obtained on their latest expedition. But their loyalty to Sunlight's Canopy ran deep, steering them to visit on their days off to buy products or relax.

As a chemist, Mariela had a stable job, but her carefree grin brought her down to their level. She was unremarkable and therefore desirable.

The information transmission channel—going by the name of Merle of Merle's Spices—was eager to spread rumors of her love life: “Who will win her affections? Sieg or Lynx? Both contenders are currently in the friend zone! And the winner to reign supreme is orc king meat, once again!” Even then, there were extremely rare occurrences of young men throwing their hat in the ring, claiming to be the one to “overthrow the orc king meat.”

“Mariela, I want you to try this.”

“Wow, this is new! Is it meat from a lightning deer?”

On that day, a young contender had apparently brought choice cuts from a rare lightning deer in an attempt to defeat the orc king. The fact that he had brought meat to woo her instead of his personality meant he really didn't stand a chance.

“Mariela, he went to all the trouble. How about treating him to dinner with the meat?”

“Great call, Sieg. Hmm, it might be good in a stew with red-wine sauce?”

“Are you sure, Mariela? Oh boy, I can't believe you're cooking for me! And thanks, Mr. Sieg?” added the man, suspicious of his motives, but over the moon about the idea.

He didn't know that he'd played right into Sieg's hands.

“Hey, Johan,” grunted Gordon, “I'll get us bread; you grab red wine.”

“Got it, Pops. Get some soft bread for me, will ya?”

“Then I s'pose I'll get some greens for the salad. And hard bread for me,” mumbled Gordon.

“And while you’re out, grab some roots for the stew! I’ll get herbs to mellow the taste. Mariela, don’t get started without me; I have tomato paste, too. And get some bread coated with sugar for me,” added Merle.

With a clatter, the dwarven trio of Gordon, Johan, and Ludan, along with Merle, stood up and began to disperse—totally uninvited but naturally inviting themselves.

When she was done cooking, the old man Ghark brought over a bundle of ham made from orc meat when their conversation reached his ears. That evening, Sunlight’s Canopy transformed into a banquet hall. Caroline trudged home with regret as the daughter from a noble family obviously wasn’t permitted to dine in the home of a commoner. After Mariela closed up shop, her dishes were set out for dinner.

“It’s delicious, Mariela!” exclaimed the young man in delight.

The regulars were happy to heap their own plates with food and chow down. As the recipe called for, she’d rubbed the herbs into the deer meat to mask its gamy taste, then trimmed off the hard tissue before boiling it until soft. The flavor came bursting out with every chew.

Mariela was a great cook. Any man who got to live with her would be very happy.

As he let his imagination run wild, the young contender savored his meal, while the other guests crammed the food into their mouths. After all, the regulars had just invited themselves over for dinner, which meant manners were already a foreign concept to them.

Meanwhile, Sieg had portioned out Mariela’s share of the food. He wasn’t one to neglect social cues. The only one who missed out on eating a full meal was the young man, serving himself a small portion at the very beginning of their dinner and completely immersed in his emotions.

“Oh... What? There’s only bread left.”

All the young man had was sauce on his plate, which he sopped up with a piece of bread. Gordon had brought over the bread from his favorite bakery, kneaded by hand by a hulking dwarven man. The unlucky suitor tore into it with

his teeth.

“I made dessert, too! Something new for today!” announced Mariela, stuffed from the meal.

From her magical refrigeration tool, she brought out some tarts with a pastry base, piled high with three-layer bavarois. Judging from the color, they appeared to contain citrus fruit.

“Something new? From a recipe?” asked Merle with caution, after she’d enjoyed plenty of the stew and bread.

“Nuh-uh. I came up with it myself. I’m confident about this one!” Mariela answered, flashing a smile. She hadn’t noticed the true motive behind Merle’s question.

That was when Sunlight’s Canopy fell into dead silence, electrifying the air with unease. Only Mariela and the young man were oblivious to this change in mood.

“Here you go.” Mariela held out a slice with a huge smile to the young man, who eagerly accepted the plate and expressed his gratitude.

All eyes were on them.

“Urp...”

As expected. Well, at least he didn’t spit it back out. The suitor of the day was an okay guy.

With their eyes glued on him, the regulars were all on the same page. The young man guzzled water as he gulped down the remainder of Mariela’s tart.

“Delicious, as always. Particularly the white layer. It has a unique texture,” commented Siegmund, eating the tart without changing his expression.

His cruel and long days as a slave had given him a special skill of eating anything.

“Really? Let’s see... *Blargh...*” Tricked by his smile, Mariela dry heaved after sinking her teeth into her culinary creation, immediately washing it down with water.

“Another failure... Weird. The rind and spongy white pith are supposed to be chock-full of nutrients. I thought sugar would get rid of the bitterness.”

“It’s enhanced by sugar, and the spongy bits coat every corner of my mouth. Helps me savor the flavor longer.”

“Aw, man... I thought sugar would bring out its acidity.”

“It really stings. Like my eyes are being stabbed. Very creative.”

“And I added a layer of yagu milk to bring the flavors together...”

“Which really brings out a gamy stench. A nice surprise after you cooked the venison perfectly. The pastry sucked all the moisture from my mouth. It’s an effective attack.”

“Sorry, Sieg. And you, sir, I apologize for making you eat this...,” said Mariela dejectedly.

“Everything you cook is delicious, Mariela,” consoled Sieg, polishing off the rest of the cake. What a hero. With a smug, almost mocking expression, he looked down at the young man.

“Urgh...” The young man gritted his teeth. “Thanks for the meal. I had a good time...,” he offered to Mariela, totally defeated, and took his leave with his tail tucked between his legs.

“I think he’d be happy if you served him the Mariela Special,” said Sieg.

Mariela was none the wiser that he’d meant it in jest.

“It’s because Mariela’s cooking enhances the effects of food in the human body. And the flavor, too. Thanks to that, my skin was absolutely glowing the next day. It was almost glassy.”

“Which was totally wasted on you, Sieg.”

“Geez, Sieg, you’re pretty conniving,” added Edgan.

The trio were surprisingly friendly with one another, while Haage loitered around in their periphery, looking like he wanted to join the group.

“Man, I want to eat something she’s cooked.....”

“Me too.”

“Hear! Hear!”

“And don’t forget her special cake.”

“Hard pass.”

“Wouldn’t it be fine if she follows a recipe?”

While they chatted excitedly about Sieg’s story, they were starting to become homesick, too.



03



The needle apes just wouldn’t let it go.

They might have wanted revenge for being unjustly driven from their paradise.

Or they held a grudge against the monster-warding potion that had turned their lovely spring into a stinking swamp.

They must have wanted to get even with Haage for stealing the hearts of their lovely ladies.

But needle apes were monsters, which meant they couldn’t coexist with humans. In the imperial capital, the scholars proposed that all monsters possessed corrupted magical gems in their bodies, telling them to hurt humankind. These magical gems were believed to be the coagulation of magical power and corruption in this world. That meant monsters with these gems inside their bodies had an inherent grudge against humans, as the creators of corruption—from malice to hatred to jealousy to terror to anger to lust.

These thoughts polluted the world; ravenous and parched, they congealed and relentlessly foraged for magical power. This was why scholars considered magical gems to be a manifestation of these thoughts. Those monsters that harbored these gems could not help but loathe humans—desperately trying to annihilate them before the world was saturated with their corruption.

But this was all conjecture. All they knew was that monsters and people were incompatible. The relationship between the two could never go beyond “kill or be killed.”

That was why this situation wasn't black-and-white. The Ahriman Springs might have been a place of recreation for the Kingdom of Endalsia two hundred years ago. It might have been paradise for the needle apes now that the Labyrinth City was trying to reclaim it. It just wasn't that simple.

As long as Sieg and his fellow humans were camped out in the Ahriman Springs, the needle apes had no choice but to try and annihilate them. Atop the wintry mountain, the humans had become too aware of this fact.

“Oh, hey, Natasha! Baring your teeth and playing hard to get? You're! Just! Too! Cute!”

“Ed, get a grip! That's a needle ape!”

“Hey, you can't discriminate, Lynx. You should know love transcends all.”

“Aaargh! Unbelievable! Sieg, talk some sense into him!”

“Mariela...”

That was all Siegmund could say, even as Edgan began to seduce the needle apes. It was total chaos. Of the three, Lynx was the only one young enough to excuse his idiocy. But the two adults were in a tizzy, leaving young Lynx to be the calm one.

At the very least, Sieg was defeating the needle apes. Edgan, on the other hand, was busy chasing ape ass. The monsters were conditioned to attack all humans on sight, and it was absurd to see the needle ape at the target of Edgan's affections sprinting for its life. There was really nothing left to say.

It had been almost a month since Sieg's group had sequestered themselves on the mountain.

The fence enclosing the Ahriman Springs had become sturdy enough to ward off monsters, and they had even made a cabin for lodging. Every hot spring in Mount Ahriman now contained a barrel of monster-warding potion. But because Haage had strewn used towels and socks from Sieg's group

everywhere, the needle apes in the mountains zeroed in on the trio. As a result, the three had become stronger—whether they liked it or not. Previously C Rank, Sieg had enough skill to be considered a B-Rank, and Lynx was able to defeat needle apes without using his shadowmaster skills. Edgan’s growth was slower than the other two, but since all he did was chase their butts, it was inevitable.

“You’ve all made amazing headway! I think we’ve defeated enough needle apes—they shouldn’t pose any problems for us. And we’ve finished building the hot springs base. Let’s leave the mountain tomorrow!”

In a surprising turn of events, Haage had granted them permission to leave.

“Seriously, Haage?! Yes! We can go home!”

“Joanna? I can finally see her! Wait for me!”

“Mariela!” In delight, Sieg clutched a letter from her delivered by the Labyrinth Suppression Forces.

She’d written letters to Lynx and Edgan, too. The soldiers had nudged Mariela to write to them, having compassion for the men. Maybe all was right in the world.

In eager agreement, Mariela included Peppity-Pep Cookies with her frequent letters. The contents droned on about her meals from that day, her meals from the other day, and other meal-related talk. Incidentally, she copied the exact same letter for all three of them, and the only grateful one was Sieg.

“Mariela...”

“Uh-huh, that’s right, Sieg. With Mariela, you’ll never have to worry about her being too lonely to eat. I mean, all she writes about is food, right? I bet she’s feeding herself and doing just fine.”

“I think Joanna’s too shy to write me any letters.”

“Ed, isn’t Needle Ape Natasha good enough?”

“Don’t you think she has too much of a wild side for my sensitive soul?”

“Mariela...”

“What, Sieg? You’re worried about the mountain minerals that the Labyrinth Suppression Forces are hauling back with them? You think they could be for a new potion, huh? I know Mariela can be a pushover, so you’re worried they’ll work her to the bone.”

“What should I bring back to give Joanna? I’ve got nothing but needle ape fur. You think she’ll like it?”

“Ed, are you seriously thinking of giving her Natasha’s pelt? That’s just cruel, dude.”

The fact they could have a conversation in this state was incredible. Although Sieg said nothing but “Mariela,” Lynx understood what he was trying to say. He must have acquired a new skill.

In their excitement to go home, the three lost sight of one important thing: Monsters and people could not coexist. And the needle apes would never forget it.

That night, the remaining needle apes launched their attack at the Ahriman Springs, as if they knew the three would be going home.

To prepare for their return to Labyrinth City, the trio had shaved their beards and trimmed their hair, which Haage sprinkled across Mount Ahriman, calling all needle apes. Not that the three realized this. They hadn’t reached his levels of combat.

In another unlucky twist, the monster-warding potions in the hot springs had been diluted by the water gushing in, making the stench now bearable to the needle apes. The tall fence around the springs and the bromominthra and daigis weren’t insurmountable obstacles for those with raging with murder.

The needle apes knew the humans who’d evicted and tried to destroy them were slumbering there.

The relationship between the two could never go beyond “kill or be killed.”

The needle apes gathered their surviving comrades and prepared for the final battle.

“Grar-grar-grar! Graaaaaahhhhr!”

The needle apes clambered over the fence, closing in on the cabin where Sieg and the others slept. At last, they'd be able to destroy the cabin in the blink of an eye.

"Ngh... What the—? Needle apes?! Come on!"

"Natasha! Sneaking into my bedroom at night? You take what you want, huh?"

"Mariela!"

The three men leaped to their feet at the sound of the needle apes' furious shrieks. The instigator, Haage, had been awake and blithely spectating.

"Took ya long enough! If they wreck the place, you can kiss home good-bye—until we rebuild it!"

It was an absurd thing to hear from the culprit behind this attack. Maybe it would be better to think of it as educational guidance—for Sieg's group to demonstrate their true strength under constrained circumstances.

"We can what?!"

"I'm sorry, Natasha. I gotta go home!"

"Ma-Mariela!"

After coming this far, there was no way they would accept any more delays! Highly motivated, they barreled out of the cabin to settle things with the needle apes once and for all.

The heat from the hot springs had melted the snow, exposing the ground around them. The needle apes were clutching stones and broken pieces of fence, hurling them with the force of a ballista.

If this had happened a month ago when the group had just arrived at the Ahriman Springs, they would have been dashed from the face of the earth. These attacks were that fast. The apes had good control, taking precise shots at their heads and legs. The trio dodged the projectiles by a hairsbreadth, cutting through the needle apes springing at them and using their blades to knock away objects that might cause damage to the hot springs or the lodging.

Lynx's daggers whistled through the air, too fast for the eye to follow their

trajectory, and found their mark in the middle of needle apes' foreheads. His control was flawless.

Siegmund's sword tore through the apes' fur. Back in the early days of their expedition, his sword had bounced off, but now he could sharpen the magical power in his sword right before it came in contact with their natural armor, boosting its sharpness ten thousandfold.

"If you bare your teeth, I can't give you a kiss, Natasha," Edgan cooed, which is to say he was just being Edgan.

He stabbed his dual swords up along the needles and into their flesh as he flew past the monsters. Not that the needle apes were standing still. Their armor of needles rippled with every movement, refusing to slow down. And yet, his finesse was incredible.

As Edgan sliced through the needle apes, he whispered "Natasha" to every single one of the female ones. It would seem there was no real difference to him.

Haage had managed to stir up a decisive battle that lasted until dawn.

Among the heaps of corpses on the battlefield, the last ones standing were the three men.

All of them had someone waiting for their return.

That had made all the difference between victory and defeat.

"Good job, fellows!"

With a snappy thumbs-up, Haage appeared through the steam, glistening in the morning light. He seemed even more infuriatingly enthusiastic than usual.

"We're going home, Haage!"

"Joanna's waiting for me!"

"Mariela!"

The trio had no time to engage with Haage. Although they'd eaten and slept under his watch for a month, they offered him only the most cursory farewell, scrambling toward the Labyrinth City before he could start talking about any

more construction or delays.

He'd be able to see Mariela. Finally. At long last. Oh, how he had looked forward to this day.

Mariela, Mariela, Mariela... Siegmund set his sights on the Labyrinth City without even a look to his side as he mowed down monsters on his way.

Sieg did not conceal his desire to see Mariela as he sprinted for the Labyrinth City, which Lynx admired. He picked up his pace, determined not to lose.

They practically tumbled down the mountain, racing across the open fields like the wind. A month of death matches with the needle apes had made their bodies light. As the scenery rushed past them, they began to understand how fast they were running.

Far off in the distance, the Labyrinth City became visible as a tiny speck, urging the three down the path.

They could see a gate to the City—probably the northern one.

The soldiers of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces must have been contacted in advance, because the three were able to enter the Labyrinth City without a problem despite the wild, bestial fervor glittering in their eyes.

They sped through the main road toward the city center. Once they turned at the street in front of the Labyrinth, Sunlight's Canopy would be a hop, skip, and jump away.

Ah, there was the sacred tree.

The familiar sight and signboard announced that he was home.

Ah, Mariela. I finally... I finally get to see you...

Sieg had been reduced to spouting nothing but "Mariela," but his thoughts would have been easy to guess.

Slam! As if this were the finish line, the trio tumbled into Sunlight's Canopy, panting.

"Welcome back, Sieg and Lynx. And Edgan, too!"

Oh, how he'd even dreamed of that voice! It greeted them as it always had

welcomed him.

Sproing. The face that greeted them was just a liiittle wider than usual.

And her clothes were bursting at the seams.

It wasn't from the sublime peaks and valleys—like a certain someone's sacred mountains. If anything, they were gently sloping hills. Everywhere. And no valleys in sight.

“Did you seriously put on *weight*?!”

“Marielaaa!!!”

Let loose to freely graze in the garden of Sunlight's Canopy, Mariela had grown tubby.

Oh, and Edgan's latest favorite, Joanna, wasn't waiting for his arrival.



04



“Hey, hey, hey! Doc, what's the meaning of this?” Lynx asked aggressively.

By “this,” he meant Mariela, sitting in a chair like a squashy lump of kneaded lynus wheat. Her thighs spread against the seat of her chair in a doughy display. In a way, it was the first time she'd been in a crisis situation since she'd awoken from suspended animation.

Lynx's group spent a month of hell fighting needle apes at the Ahriman Springs, and they'd all advanced enough to be B Rank. You could say they leveled up. And when they finally trudged home, they found Mariela had experienced rapid growth, too. It might as well be a change in character class, never mind leveling up. They hadn't asked for this. It was so unexpected that Lynx was close to acquiring a skill for coercion or some other form of vindictive delinquency.

“Hrm... I warned her, but...”

It was rare to see Nierenberg avert his gaze. If the soldiers of the Labyrinth

Suppression Forces saw it, their eyes would have been as big as saucers in surprise.

To think Lynx, one of the three people in the lowest tier of the Ahriman Springs hierarchy, had overpowered *Nierenberg*.

“Lyyynx, you’re so mean. I wrote about meals in my letters, didn’t I?” Mariela’s round cheeks became even more rotund—further proving Lynx’s point. She must have been puffing them up. Somehow.

“Yeah? You mean when you were writing about the sweets from somewhere-or-another and cookies from so-and-so?”

“Yeah, snack meals,” replied *Meatiela*—er, Mariela with a cheeky grin on her face.

Snack meals? What in the world? He knew what she meant. Sure.

“Snacks are snacks! And! Meals! Are! Meals! Don’t think this made-up word will get you outta this!” Lynx flew into a rage as if he was her mother or something, while her guard and guardian, Sieg, pushed his way into the conversation to back her up.

“Our village in the countryside didn’t have sweets. You just happened to overindulge a little, huh?”

“That’s right, Sieg.”

“There’s nothing ‘right’ about it! Geez, Sieg! You spoil her. It’s not good for her!”

“N-not good for her?!?”

Sieg brought his long history with Mariela into the conversation, which was totally irrelevant and earned him a biting comment from Lynx. He finally had the opportunity to mutter something other than “Mariela,” and now this. Sieg might need medical treatment or therapy. Particularly therapy.

Lynx tore at his hair, pointing sternly at Mariela.

“Mariela! From now on, I’m calling you *Chubby*-ela until we’re back to where you started! We’re gonna go look for materials in the Labyrinth! You’re going on a diet!”

“Oh?! The Labyrinth? Materials? I’ll do it!”

From that day forward, Chubbyela began to hunt for items from the Labyrinth.

Lynx’s “not good for her” speech seemed to have flipped a switch in Sieg, upping her evil teacher count to two. From intense exercise to a balanced and restricted diet, they had it down to a tee.

Thus, with the new exercise of hunting items in the Labyrinth and Sieg restricting her snacks, her figure quickly returned to its original shape, and Chubbyela became Mariela again. The crisis had been averted with her effort and her friends’ cooperation..... Well, it might be more accurate to call it coercion.



05



“Dehydrate, Dehydrate, Deeeyyyhydrate.”

Mariela’s carefree voice echoed through the Labyrinth.

This was the twenty-third stratum, known as the Shores of Eternal Night, where lunamagia flourished.

Because she’d made a ton of high-grade potions at the request of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, there was a shortage of lunamagia in the Labyrinth City. This place was perfect for Mariela’s diet and for gathering materials.

Lunamagia grew in the Labyrinth from the nineteenth to the twenty-third stratum. Most adventurers gathered it from the twentieth, as this was the threshold of D-Rank monsters. C-Rank ones started to appear from the twenty-first stratum onward. Adventurers of C Rank and higher considered the monsters in these four strata suitable for their rank—though neither profitable nor tasty. Even if you gathered lunamagia in spare moments while hunting, it would be much more efficient to hunt in a different stratum altogether.

Those who decided to gather lunamagia for a living were exclusively D Rank, and their gathering spots were constrained to the nineteenth and twentieth strata where these monsters appeared.

Mariela's group was in the twenty-third stratum, as recommended by Ghark for its lunamagia. The monsters on this floor were stronger than those in the previous two strata, but they were massive and rare in number. If their guard was strong enough, even a civilian could safely harvest lunamagia.

In accordance with its name, the Shores of Eternal Night was lit like the night of a full moon. The darkness was kept at bay by the moonstones scattered on the ceiling and walls of the stratum, all the way to the ground and the lakes.

There were lakes of all sizes and gentle streams weaving through the trees. Over beds of moss and curtains of algae slipped clear water, showered in the light. The droplets of water that plipped on breaks in the stream sounded like music.

They could hear the rush of water from far away, perhaps from a waterfall somewhere.

If you followed the timbre of the waterfall and the burbling of the streams, you would find a large lake. The many voices of water in the dark stratum were hauntingly beautiful and tickled one's inner explorer—beckoning you to push aside the trees and peek through.

But a monster nest awaited there.

"Screeech!"

"Hiss! Hiss, geeeh!"

You see, this stratum was a den of lizardmen.

These lizard monsters started appearing from the nineteenth stratum onward, overlapping with fields of lunamagia. As the adventurers traveled down, the lizards got increasingly bigger, until they were lizardmen, walking on two legs with a reptilian slouch on the twenty-first stratum. On the twenty-second, they were completely bipedal, their arms extending longer, and they attacked in herds with spears of sharpened wood. It was as close to witnessing the evolution of lizards as one could get.

By the time you reached the twenty-third stratum, they became harder to encounter, though their height inflated to two or three yards with another yard for their tail. They were called armored lizardmen because of their tough scales. They possessed some form of intelligence, capable of calling to one another in near words as if to communicate to their fellow monsters in the manner of orcs.

Since the monsters were tough and smart, it took time for C-Rank adventurers to defeat them, but there was a low chance of obtaining magical gems compared to other monsters. Instead, they left behind their hides, which were heavy and unwieldy, and their smelly, dry, and generally inedible meat. These hunting grounds just didn't cut it for C-Rank adventurers—even though they could cull lunamagia. It was always deserted. And today was no exception. It was as if Mariela's group had booked it for a private event.

Of course, the armored lizardmen were no threat to Sieg or Lynx after training in the Ahriman Springs. It should have been no problem for Mariela to wander along, plucking lunamagia and *Dehydrating* it without a care for the world.

“Screeech! Sh-cha! Raaaah!”

“Grar-rar-rah!”

Their luggage-carrying raptor was provoking the armored lizardmen. It was a surprise to learn that reptiles could make such loathsome expressions.

The area around the stairs connecting the different strata of the Labyrinth was said to be a safe zone. For some reason, the monsters didn't go there. In general, the monsters had low IQs, and it had been confirmed that those in the deeper strata preyed on those in the shallower ones. If monsters could move freely between levels, the superior species would prey on those at the bottom of the natural hierarchy and eventually push out humans from the Labyrinth altogether. This was why the Labyrinth restricted their movement.

Even among experts, the concept of a sentient labyrinth was hotly contested. But there was one area where they could find common ground: If it was better for the Labyrinth to confine the monsters to their strata, these restrictions could be removed if the conditions reached a certain threshold, causing monsters to swarm out. That was called a Stampede. To prevent this, it was believed that soldiers and adventurers needed to go into the Labyrinth and

defeat monsters to keep the scale from tipping.

That was why yagus and other docile animals were hesitant to enter the Labyrinth, even though they could move between levels. Meaning it was up to the humans or raptors and other fierce cavalry animals to carry their supplies.

As for the raptor that had been provoking the armored lizardmen, it wasn't stronger than the monsters. It simply hid behind Lynx as it taunted the lizardmen. Bearing its fangs and threatening to sink its teeth in the monsters, it was way too eager to fight.

Irritated by the raptor darting behind him, Lynx called out to the other luggage-bearer.

"Jay! Keep an eye on the raptor, would ya?" Lynx called to a slave of the Black Iron Freight Corps, who was slowly picking up hides and magical gems dropped by lizardmen. In response, he moved in the direction of the raptor.

Yuric trained the raptors well, but this particular one was newly purchased when the Black Iron Freight Corps built a base in the Labyrinth City for transport around the City. It was hard to say if the creature had been trained for long enough, and it was young, fickle, and brimming with curiosity. With a naughty streak, the raptor readily changed its attitude depending on the person. It quietly obeyed those with more strength, including Lynx or Sieg, but it assumed a mocking attitude and refused to take orders from anyone it could overpower. When Yuric was around, his skills as an animal trainer granted complete control over the animal, so the raptor turned into a docile and obedient creature for anyone. But the members of the Black Iron Freight Corps, including Yuric, had left for the imperial capital, and the only ones in the Labyrinth City were Lynx, the newly minted husband Dick, and the slave, Jay.

Since Edgan had gotten stronger at the Ahriman Springs, Dick was free to remain in the Labyrinth City, but if they were going to leave behind their strongest member, Malraux had to accompany the Corps to make up the difference. Among the three weakest members, Jay had happened to catch the Forces' eye and stayed behind in the City.

Naturally, Jay had been given miscellaneous tasks, including looking after the raptor.

“Grr! Raah!”

“I!”

The raptor refused to listen to Jay, pretending to take a chomp out of him instead. Jay stumbled backward onto the damp ground near the streams, moistening his pants and staining his rear end in an unsightly fashion.

“Tch, pathetic,” Lynx snipped, and Jay reddened.

He silently began to gather up the materials that had scattered when he fell. Of course, he couldn’t fire back with any quips—his vocal cords had been crushed.

“Oh, raaaaaptor! C’mere,” cooed Mariela.

“Grah! Grah.” The raptor adopted a completely different expression, wagging its tail as it trotted to her.

Mariela should have been the weakest person in this team—not Jay—save for her magic. Although she usually restrained this power to prevent others from taking notice, the raptor knew exactly who it was dealing with upon receiving water infused with magic. Other than Yuric, Mariela was the one it listened to the most. Lynx teased that it was like feeding a stray cat that won’t leave.

Mariela piled bundles of dried lunamagia onto the raptor, a burden that was nothing to a creature accustomed to pulling armored carriages on its own. It turned its back to Mariela as if to say, “Want a ride?”

“I’ll walk on my own,” she replied, cooing that it was so hardworking and letting it lap some water from her cupped hands.

It wasn’t because she had learned to enjoy exercise, unfortunately. Whenever she tried to take it easy, Lynx would open his eyes wide and waggle his fingers near his face, chasing her around with a “I’m gonna tear off your fat!”

See? His eyes are all big again!

As Lynx chased her around, Mariela shuddered, remembering the era of Chubbyela when she’d been forced to run from the Labyrinth’s twenty-third stratum all the way up to the surface.

Sieg had cheered Chubbyela on with all his might, with cries of “Just a little

more!” “Food tastes the best after exercise!” and “I’ll give you three marshmallows in your cocoa today,” as he ran alongside her.

The morning after her twenty-three-stratum dash, Lynx had paid her a visit. Mariela would never forget it.

“Chubbyela, let’s go to the Laabyrinth.”

Her knees had still been knocking against each other. If she hadn’t been able to heal her muscle aches with Regen medicine, it would have been hell for her. Those eyes of his were serious.

Bless the Regen medicine!



06



In winter, sunset came early. Although Mariela’s party had left the Shores of Eternal Night to make it home in time for dinner, the sun had completely set, and the City was illuminated by artificial light.

“Brrr, it’s so cold.”

“Grah.”

The lunamagia-filled Shores of Eternal Night were nippy, but night at the Labyrinth City was chilling to the bone.

Laden with bundles of dried medicinal herbs, the raptor followed Mariela, braying as though in agreement. Mariela, Sieg, and Lynx carried hardly anything, while Jay wobbled behind them stacked high with hides from armored lizardmen. Although the raptor still could carry more, it had growled threateningly at Jay when he tried to place his bundle on it, forcing him to carry the load himself.

Although the citizens ambling through the roads ogled the raptor, no one paid any attention to the average civilian Mariela or the weighed-down Jay.

Dehydrating herbs was an easy task for those with alchemical skills—even if

they weren't a Pact-Bearer. Since dried medicinal herbs could be carried in greater quantities, it was not unusual to see someone with those skills in a party. Plus, most herbs stored their properties better when dried at the temperature and humidity of their natural habitat.

As for Jay, he was led by Lynx and Sieg, who could be easily identified as high-ranking adventures from their equipment and swagger. From an outsider's perspective, he was simply a slave for a group of adventurers, tasked with carrying their load. Depending on the observer, they might even assume that his masters were humane for clothing him in a decent outfit.

It was customary for a slave to be weighed down by luggage—as it was customary for his masters to hold hardly anything.

At the Adventurers Guild, Lynx sold the lizardmen hides and magical stones, handing Jay the change—twenty copper coins—with an order to take the raptor back to the base. Jay eagerly received his dinner money, thrilled. After Mariela soothed the raptor with some water, Jay headed back to the base with it.

To give a slave twenty copper coins for dinner and letting him choose his meal was exceptional treatment.

Nice, I can have some booze. I mean, I thought I had it good, staying in the safety of the Labyrinth City, but boy, they worked me to the bone. At least I get to have a drink. It's stupid cold today. I can't wait to get to the base and throw one back.

Jay stocked up on as much of the cheapest alcohol as his coins would get him before heading for the Black Iron Freight Corps' base. There was orc meat at the base for raptor feed. No one would notice if he snuck a few bites.

Upon arrival, he gave the raptor its share of water and meat, tossed the dried medicinal herbs into the storehouse, and sipped on his cheap drink, picking at the orc meat.

"Five silver coins from the lizardman hides and magical stones. I'm gonna go hard at the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion."

"How many meals is 'going hard,' Lynx?"

"Enough to feed a family of three!"

“Hooow do you never gain weight?!”

Noisy as usual, the trio headed to the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion and placed a huge order.

Even though there was enough food to go around, Lynx swiped meat from Mariela’s plate, while Sieg heaped it high with vegetables.

“Argh, Lyyynx! Why’re you taking meat from *my* plate? Take some from Sieg’s!”

“I already did. I’m just so fast you couldn’t see it.”

“Oh? Really?”

“Hey, Mariela. You haven’t touched your vegetables.”

“What? I thought I finished, but I guess...”

On one hand, Sieg was slipping vegetables onto Mariela’s plate at supersonic speed, while Lynx kept pilfering chunks of her meat. It was really mean, seeing as she wasn’t Chubbyela anymore! Well, it could have been a calculated effort to prevent post-diet rebound. After all, Sieg was supposed to always be on Mariela’s side (key words: *supposed to*).

“Hey! You just took another one!”

“Mwa-ha-ha! Too late! And all that’s left is the illusion. *Nom-nom.*”

While Lynx made full use of his physical abilities to tease Mariela, Sieg took advantage of every opportunity to make use of *his* physical abilities, stacking her plate with vegetables and swapping her cuts of meat for those with less fat. It was terrifyingly coordinated. Harmony between two people. Expect no less from the warriors who’d obliterated the needle apes on Mount Ahriman.

Once they were bursting from food and laughter, the remainder of their earnings were evenly divided between Lynx and Sieg.

“You guys earned it,” said Mariela, turning down her share as usual.

At Mariela’s house, Sieg managed both of their earnings, including payments for the potions. If it were left to Mariela, she’d splurge on slimes to collect every available acidic liquid or impulse buy unnecessary magical tools or dine on orc

king meat every day. After a discussion, they decided on a fixed amount for living expenses and an allowance, which Sieg gave to her every month. Of course, Sieg received the same allowance as Mariela.

Their allowances were scant for a B-Rank adventurer and an alchemist concocting high-grade potions. But with living expenses, weapons, armor, and items needed for work coming from other funds, it was more than enough. Every time Mariela received her allowance, she scrambled out of the house, clutching her purse tightly, and came home with useless knickknacks to Sieg's chagrin.

To Mariela, it was only natural for her to have the same allowance as Sieg. Lynx and the others in their lives might chide him for spoiling her, but none felt this arrangement was weird, even knowing Sieg's past. No one pointed out that it was strange for Sieg to receive a share of the money from the hunt—even though it went against the cultural hegemony that a slave's earnings belonged to their master.

About five months prior, Sieg and Jay stood together as slaves in the rear yard of Reymond's slave trading company. Jay had watched Sieg taking care of the raptors while he'd been on the brink of death.

Even now, both Sieg and Jay remained penal laborers.

Except no one thought of Sieg as a slave anymore.

He carried a mythril sword and wore basilisk leather armor he'd obtained through the Black Iron Freight Corps. But it was his mannerisms as Mariela's escort that signaled he was a fine gentleman—even more than his expensive equipment.

Even though Jay was dressed in decent clothing, he didn't care to dust off dirt from his butt or clean his face or teeth. His posture was hunched, and he scrutinized his surroundings with darting eyes. His mouth might form a genial smile, but his dull looks made those around him uneasy. He wore normal clothes, yet no one doubted he was a slave.

Sieg and Jay had gone from occupying the rear yard of the slave trading company to going to the Labyrinth together.

Sieg was enjoying dinner with Mariela and Lynx, roaring with laughter.

They sat around the dining table set with dishes upon dishes and quality drinks—though Sieg and Lynx only drank in moderation and never got drunk. There was no hint of the old Sieg, a fool who ruined himself by indulging in alcohol and pleasure. Now he had someone to protect.

Meanwhile, Jay guzzled down cheap alcohol, voicelessly chuckling with his crushed vocal cords; it'd been his first drink in a while.

As long as he could get drunk without breaking the bank, that was fine. Jay was plastered from cheap spirits that boasted nothing but their strength, chewing on orc meat that he'd cooked with a sprinkle of salt. When Lynx returned, he'd confiscate the booze. His greed spurred him to polish off the bottle. Cradling the empty bottle with the tenderness of a cherished teddy bear, Jay curled up on his bed at the base of the Black Iron Freight Corps. To him, nothing in the world seemed more important than himself.

The next morning, Sieg woke up in his room in Sunlight's Canopy to continue training with Nierenberg, while Jay got up with the sharp pangs of a hangover. On his way back from getting water, he peeked into the storehouse and noticed the lunamagia he thought he'd tossed in yesterday wasn't there.

Where's the stuff from yesterday?

Late at night, as the City slumbered, the alchemical materials brought to the Black Iron Freight Corps' base were carried through the underground Aqueduct to Sunlight's Canopy. Lynx had transported the lunamagia from the day before while Jay had been sleeping off the alcohol.

Come to think of it, these herbs always disappear when I'm not lookin'. What's goin' on?

Jay was not suspicious because he was admirable enough to help the Black Iron Freight Corps. In fact, he refused to be grateful for receiving decent clothes and enough food to eat.

Despite being subjected to slavery for his crimes, Jay seethed in hatred and hostility for those who treated him as a slave. If only there was a dirty scheme or signs of weakness he could weaponize. He contemplated the disappearance

of the medicinal herbs.

Since Jay's vocal cords had been crushed, he couldn't voice his question aloud. And since he was illiterate, he had no way to scan documents for information. All he could do to investigate the situation was keep his eyes peeled and his ears pricked.

The herbs usually disappear at night. And often. This ain't the work of an outsider. That newlywed is probably makin' out with his hot bride, so Smiley must be the one takin' the herbs, Jay thought as his head pounded with a hangover.

It would be convenient for him if a member of the Black Iron Freight Corps was selling medicinal herbs through illegal channels. If he could dig up some good dirt, he'd probably be able to get hush money for it.

Hrm? That's odd. I'd get it if Smiley wanted to make a profit from herbs that he bought with his group's money. But didn't that lot gather 'em on their own? Why not sell the herbs in the open? If he wanted to hide 'em, why would he bring 'em here—not to their final destination? Where's he takin' 'em?

Jay's nostrils twitched and flared. He'd gotten a whiff of money. A good deal lay just ahead. And he was extremely good at sniffing those out.

Been a long time since I felt like this. This's gonna be a cash cow, I know it.

Would the day come when the suspicions budding within Jay involved Sieg and Mariela?

Would the fates of Sieg and Jay intersect once again, after they parted ways in the rear yard of the slave trading company?

Spring was far away. The nights were long, and the morning sun took its time before illuminating the City in full.

In the low visibility of the Labyrinth City, only Jay's eyes glinted with light.





Sieg trudged through the thawing snow as he headed for the Ahriman Springs once more.

Though the snow on the mountain had already melted, the wind blasting through the terrain was still bitterly cold. It was almost unbelievable to think that spring would be upon them soon.

But when he cast his gaze on the mountain's trees, he could spot small buds pushing out of their branches. At his feet, sprouts were emerging from the ground.

If Mariela saw this, she'd be over the moon about the material-gathering possibilities.

He could picture her scuttling around from a tree branch over there and picking at the ground over here, completely forgetting the original mission as she hoarded materials.

After confirming there was no change in the bundle strapped to his back, Sieg started walking along the narrow animal trail to the Ahriman Springs.

The results from his brutal winter training session with Lynx and Edgan seemed to be showing. On his back was a bundle that seemed too large for a single man to carry alone. Mariela sat inside of it, dozing off.

It was fine that she'd gotten up at the crack of dawn, beyond excited to go to the Ahriman Springs. But by the time they'd reached the foot of the mountain, she had run out of energy, and Sieg carried her along with his other equipment.

"I'm sorry, Sieg. I promise to start walking after I get a little rest," she'd said at the beginning. "Not too heavy, is it? I don't think I've gained weight..."

But as time went on, stuffed next to the other gear and gently swaying on Sieg's back, she'd fallen sound asleep. Apparently, it was the perfect rhythm to induce a nap.

Sieg didn't anticipate she'd be able to go all the way to the Ahriman Springs on her own two feet. Plus, they would reach their destination sooner, because they weren't wasting time in the name of gathering materials. All in all, Sieg was

thankful that she was fast asleep.

To Mariela, this trip to the Ahriman Springs was a dream come true.

“I wanna go to a hot spring! I wanna go! I might be sick! I mean, I shed a bunch of weight recently! It could be anything!” she yelled in front of Nierenberg.

How could anyone this energetic be sick? Even in the dry winter air, Mariela’s skin remained supple. Plus, on her allegedly superthin body, she’d regained the fat pockets that she’d had before she put on weight, making her look as healthy as ever. Sickness had nothing on Mariela if she could whip up one of her high-grade potions—and there was definitely no need to go to a hot spring to heal.

Nierenberg obviously knew Mariela wasn’t sick, but he negotiated with Weishardt’s group. “It’s important to let her rest every now and then.”

His face might be terrifying, but he did have a soft spot for women. After all, he’d let Mariela become Chubbyela under his supervision.

“Please don’t feed her,” Sieg wanted to scold Nierenberg, as her zookeeper—er, as her *guardian*. But he couldn’t help but thank him from the bottom of his heart for blessing this trip to the Ahriman Springs.

He was spending a night at the Ahriman Springs with Mariela. An overnight trip. And that was wonderful.

But they lived under the same roof, one might have protested, but that was foolish. To see Mariela’s melty smile from the other side of the steam? To witness her flushed face getting out of the water? Priceless. It would be that amazing.

The hot springs were surrounded by fences to keep monsters out, and the only cabin was that one hut that had housed Sieg’s group during their first expedition. After all, the Ahriman Springs had taken a nosedive two hundred years ago, its facilities destroyed before becoming a paradise of the monkey monsters known as needle apes. To cut to the chase, this was basically a secluded spring in the mountains. It didn’t have gendered zones. This needed to be emphasized: The Ahriman Springs had mixed bathing. To the delight of many.

The Labyrinth City didn't have a mixed bathing culture. With the threat of monsters in mind, all baths were constructed indoors. This was common sense. But nothing could be done if there weren't enough buildings—and if there was only one bath.

Sieg gave himself a warning. *I'm an escort. My duty is always to protect Mariela. That's nonnegotiable even in hot springs.*

It will be fine. I've prepared a bathing suit just in case. All risks have been mitigated...!

Sieg must have become a little eccentric from living a stoic life for too long. He seemed to be developing a one-track mind. His definition of *risk* was wrong in the first place. It didn't matter if you turned it on its head: A swimsuit had nothing to do with keeping Mariela safe. What else could possibly be stashed in the bundle on his back?

But of course, he considered Mariela's safety his highest priority. The previous day, he'd traveled to the Ahriman Springs to make sure the road was safe. Along with Mariela, he carried enough provisions to camp out even in the winter mountains if something unexpected happened. It wasn't as if he'd brought *only* a swimsuit.

With the Labyrinth Suppression Forces marching up and down the mountain frequently, there were almost no monster appearances on the road to the Ahriman Springs. Now that a supervisor was permanently stationed at the hut to manage the place, it was possible to detect a human presence from a distance. The trees in the vicinity had been mowed down, which made firewood plentiful. This helped cement his confirmation that it would probably be safe to bring Mariela.

The final hurdle was to carry out the trip to the hot springs without anyone around them finding out about it. Sieg wanted to go there with Mariela. No exceptions. Just the two of them, if at all possible.

"Almost there, Sieg. No monsters are around."

"Yeah...," replied Sieg, looking at Lynx with a sour expression.

There was no way Sieg's overtly suspicious scheme would go as planned. Lynx

had found out about it without much difficulty and weaseled himself into their strategem. Just as you would expect from a scout of the Black Iron Freight Corps. He saw through Sieg's desperate attempt to spin his story and turned it into a three-person trip. Sieg should have been more gracious. After all, Lynx had given him a great excuse to ensure no other nuisances might tag along on this trip. And he had the ability to make any place more fun, encouraging Mariela to let loose. If she wore a swimsuit, it wouldn't be much different from taking a dip in the ocean. It would be easy to broach the topic of a mixed bath. A delightful topic.

Well, if they just handed her the swimsuit and boldly invited her to the hot spring with them, Mariela wouldn't think twice about it. But from Sieg's point of view, it was critical that this remained an accidental situation, where they just *so happen* to find themselves in a mixed bath. Lynx agreed that this was important. Something was obviously wrong with their minds.

This was right around the time when news reached Edgan's ears, and he would cry in resentment. But Natasha the Needle Ape had already been wiped from the mountains. He just had to suck it up.

"Mariela. Mariela, we're here," Sieg whispered to wake her as she continued to doze on his back. "The mountain road was cold, huh? Let's hurry and get into the water."

Sieg forgot to mention the hot spring to get her all giddy. Mariela didn't have even the slightest thought that Sieg had secretly plotted a stupid scheme. As soon as she opened her eyes, Sieg helped her off his back, and she broke into a sprint toward the hut as if she just couldn't wait any longer.

"Hellooo!"

"Oh, welcome. It must'a been a long trip. We've just opened to the public, and there might be amenities we're missin', but the hot spring is a fine piece o' work. Take a load off yer feet." An elderly married dwarven couple plodded outside to greet them.

"Yer room is this way," announced the dwarven grandma, shuffling out of the hut that housed Sieg's groups before, leading them farther into the forest.

"Wait a sec. We're not staying in this hut?" asked Lynx.

“We’re usin’ this ourselves. It’s in no shape for guests. I built a place for lodgin’ farther back.”

A dwarf never forgot his roots, eh? Not much time had passed since Sieg’s group had left the Ahriman Springs, but an impressive log boardinghouse had been erected during their absence.

“Hey, Sieg. This is news to me,” Lynx whispered.

“When I came to check up on the place yesterday, I kind of just observed the hut from a distance. I certainly didn’t see this. I can’t believe he built this in such a short time...”

Sieg and Lynx exchanged a hushed conversation as the dwarven grandma led them to the boardinghouse.

They had a bad feeling about this. Their sixth sense had been honed during their battles against the needle apes, and it was blaring an alarm bell in their heads.

“And this here is the women’s bath, and this’s the men’s bath. It may be a wood buildin’, but my husband built it nice ‘n’ sturdy. No danger here. Young lady, ye can take a bath with peace o’ mind,” drawled the dwarf grandma.

I knew it...!!! Sieg and Lynx buried their faces in their hands.

Their dreams of hopping in a bath with Mariela had been obliterated right before their very eyes. Sieg especially was not taking this well. He’d never thought this scenario through! The bundle on his back started to feel twice as heavy, weighing him down.

“Wow!” marveled Mariela without noticing the reactions of the two men. “But the needle apes are gone now, right?”

Mariela had believed monsters to be the dangerous ones, twisting the knife in her companions’ hearts and gutting them completely.

“Yes’m. But now that the needle apes are no more, weak monsters sometimes come out from the woodworks. Well, my husband can beat them back just fine. And today, we have those trusty companions of yers, so ye can rest easy,” she chattered, pushing open the door to the log cabin that could

easily house a few dozen people.

They could hear the clamor of a banquet, as if guests were already inside.

“Hey! I’ve been waiting for you! The booze ran out; I was getting worried!”

Beyond the door, they found the brilliant morning sun. Well, not exactly, but there’s no need to rephrase. The cliché has played out so many times now that it’s becoming an art form.

This disappointing turn of events was a rite of passage, almost, for a giddy young man on an overnight trip with his crush. Sieg was taking it the hardest, even though he was a full-blown adult.

“Oh! Mr. Haage. I didn’t realize you were coming, too.”

“That’s right! It’s a company trip with the guys from the Adventurers Guild!”

It would seem that Mariela wasn’t the only one who’d whined to go to the hot springs.

“The guildmaster barreled into our rooms before dawn. That’s why we got here so early.”

“And its only just past noon, but he’s downed all the alcohol.”

“Oh, but don’t worry. If he goes too crazy, we’ll bundle him up and toss him out of here. He shouldn’t be a bother.”

“The guildmaster might be obnoxious, but the hot springs are just wonderful. We’ve been here a week, and it’s let us make marked progress. I just want him to pass out. Then I can relax in the hot springs.”

In the great hall near the entrance, they found all the top dogs of the Adventurers Guild looking after Haage and enjoying a feast. Their comments had no filter, meaning they must have put aside their standings to enjoy themselves. Well, it might be a normal thing for them, because Haage didn’t appear to be very drunk as he polished off the bottle with a carefree laugh.

“You saying there’s nothing for us to eat or drink?!” lamented Lynx, who always ate enough for two.

At the moment, his stomach growled. His dreams of baths with Mariela and

thrilling nighttime chats had all been smashed to bits. He wanted to enjoy the feast—at the very least.

“What’re you talking about? You brought stuff with you.”

No. Way. Sieg lowered his bundle, ripping it open to check its contents.

“Th-this is.....!!!”

What had happened? His emergency meals for unforeseen natural disasters had been swapped with alcohol, processed foods, cheese, bacon, and vegetables. Of course, there was no swimsuit among them.

“Ah, thank goodness. Ye brought everything the Labyrinth Suppression Forces requested. My husband caught a lot o’ game; I’ll cook it and bring it out right away,” added the dwarven grandma, retrieving Sieg’s bundle as Haage’s group snatched up the alcohol.

“When did it get switched...?”

“Could it have been when you were here yesterday?”

It was safer to come to the Ahriman Springs on the same day as Haage’s group than to haul provisions on their own. Thanks to the cover story that Sieg and Lynx were delivering food and alcohol to Haage, no one would question why Mariela got to go to the hot springs on opening day. To outsiders, Mariela’s group could be disguised as those delivering goods to the top brass of the Adventurers Guild who were on a company trip to the hot springs.

“I’m being confronted by my own ineptitude...”

Where had the excitement of the past few days gone? At the urging of the elderly dwarven supervisor, Lynx and Sieg let her lead them to their room.

Afterward, Sieg slipped into the men’s bath, cradling his knees and nearly drowning in the deepish water.



*

“The bath was huge! I could swim in it!”

“Oh, Mariela. I see you didn’t accidentally fall asleep and drown in the tub. Good job.”

“I...I would never! That’s dangerous, you know! ...Er, I don’t do that *anymore*. Got it?” Mariela shouted back.

Lynx poked fun at Mariela for a little while.

“Since we’re here, let’s play a game!”

“Now that sounds like fun!” For some reason, Haage latched on to Lynx’s proposal.

First, it was an arm-wrestling competition, then a classic game of Can You Guess What’s in the Box?, and then it quickly devolved into anything else they could come up with on the spot. The dwarven grandma was an excellent cook, and the group feasted on dwarven cuisine full of the mountain’s bounty, which people didn’t really get to experience in the Labyrinth City. There were dishes with meat, too. As her master had foretold, Mariela was completely satisfied with this paradise of hot springs and meat.

“This is the first time I’ve ever partied in a big crowd! Thank you for bringing me, Sieg and Lynx!”

“Seeing you happy makes me happy, too, Mariela,” replied Sieg. For all his dashed dreams, Mariela’s delight made it all worthwhile.

“Well, *someone* slept on Sieg’s back the whole way. We brought you here. Literally.”

“Hmph! I’ll walk on the way home!”

The party at the Ahriman Springs continued almost until dawn.

Mariela was all tuckered out, perched in the bundle on Sieg’s back on the way home.

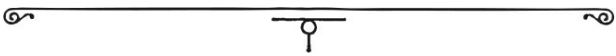
“It was different from the original plan, but...I had fun,” said Sieg.

“Yeah. Let’s go again sometime. Just the three of us. Invite me next time,

Sieg,” replied Lynx with a laugh.

CHAPTER 2

The Black Fiends





01



“It’s chilly in the cellar, Mariela. Why not take a break?” called out Sieg as he made his way toward Mariela, who was busy at work.

Huddled next to a small magical tool for heating, she immersed herself in her task. Her hands had grown numb from the cold, and her fingers were red and puffy with frostbite.

Mariela rubbed her hands together in front of the fireplace to warm them.

Before passing her a cup of cocoa, Sieg handed her a low-grade potion he’d brought from underground. When she massaged it into her fingers, the frostbite was cured, and she applied the remaining potion to her face and hair.

“Down to up, down to up. Lift it up.”

This was a common sight in the imperial capital where potions could be obtained for cheap.

Potions healed injuries. Technically, rashes were a minor dermal injury, meaning they could be cured with a low-grade potion. Households that didn’t struggle to make ends meet doled out low-grade potions to children sustaining the smallest of wounds. It was common for the mothers to use the remaining bits on their faces for beauty.

Obviously, the commoners didn’t live lives of luxury where they could use them on the regular. There were cosmetics for daily use that circulated on the market. Low-grade potions were what could be called “intensive repair.”

“Here, Sieg. You too. That scar on your face hasn’t really faded,” Mariela commented, dribbling some of the low-grade potion into Sieg’s hands.

“It’d be weird if this scar just disappeared all of a sudden. Better for it to remain,” Sieg responded, spreading the potion over the scratches from Nierenberg’s training. Afterward, he handed Mariela the cup of cocoa.

With the low-grade potion applied to it, Mariela's face had become smooth as a peach. She brought the steaming cup close.

Ahhh. Her face looked like a freshly peeled egg. Mariela was making good use today of the uses she'd been born with.

Before a blazing fireplace, the living room was furnished with one couch across from a stool and a table crowded with some knickknacks. These had been purchased at the Furniture Market, which opened soon after Sieg's group had departed for the Ahriman Springs. Every piece of furniture had been discovered by Mariela, approved in design by Sherry, appraised in quality by Caroline, and haggled over by Amber. In fact, they were such pros at seeking out the best items in the store that the four of them could have been offered employment in the furniture industry.

The pieces all came secondhand from noble families, but they were minimalistic and charming, suiting the living room of Sunlight's Canopy. Though they were created by different artisans and removed from their original sets, their colors and charm brought it all together. They did a great job. The wooden box had been retired from its position as a desk substitute and now served as an actual box in the cellar.

"I spent a little too much at the Furniture Market. Sieg, I'm almost out of the funds that you gave me to use while you were gone."

Mariela had even used the money meant for food on furniture. While Sieg wasn't there, she apparently survived by chewing through orc meat from the magical refrigeration tool, medicinal herbs from her garden, and "samples" of sweets delivered by Merle.

"I mean, it's your money. It's fine if you can make it work."

"I guess. Oh, but look at this! It's as fluffy as the one at Lady Carol's house!" Mariela laughed happily as she bounced up and down on the couch.

Sieg didn't know that this was the first time Mariela had hopped on it in glee.

Boing-a! Boing! Boing.

Aw, man...

Without someone to scold her, Sunlight's Canopy had just felt too big for one person.

Sieg's group had been away at the Ahriman Springs. The customers had left, and Nierenberg had gone home.

"Hey, Slaaaken? Can you hear me?" Mariela would say, clutching a box of sweets as she booked it to her atelier, trying to converse with her Slime-in-a-Vial, Slaken. She had munched on sweets, making potions in between bites.

Sure, she'd squandered a portion of her allowance at the Furniture Market, but it wasn't as though she had been broke. Her meals might have been lonely—or maybe just bothersome. Either way, Mariela hadn't wanted to talk about that kind of thing. But her time together with Sieg was flooded with warmth.

"Your cocoa is the best, Sieg. Top me off with another marshmallow, please," she whined.

And he always responded. "...Am I spoiling her...?" he murmured. "Just for today, all right?" He plopped another one into her cup.

Ever since he had returned, she savored these days.

"And what did you make today?" Sieg asked with a shy smile.

Mariela was blowing on the new marshmallow, making it move around. "Hmm. Just some specialized insecticide potions."

That was what she had just been working on in the cellar. Instead of hauling everything to her atelier, she'd done everything in the cellar to make a big batch of potions. Plus, the materials were heavy and generated too much by-product for the slime tank garbage can. It just made sense to do it there.



02



Let's go back to when Sieg's group was training hard at the Ahriman Springs.

Even though he wasn't training Sieg anymore, Nierenberg still arrived early in

the morning. During those minutes before the store opened, he asked Mariela questions about potions and checked her physical condition.

One of those questions: “Are there any potions that can kill insects?”

Up until this moment, he had only asked about their effects on people.

“Insects...?” Mariela repeated, cocking her head as she thought. “There are potions that repel them and ones that kill them. But their compositions are different depending on the type of insect. There are about five different kinds of your average insecticide potion. But the ones that are extra effective are the mid-grade potions. I don’t know how well they’d work on monsters.”

Two hundred years ago, Mariela lived in a house in the Fell Forest, which was swarming with insects. To prevent them from ravaging the medicinal herb garden or entering the house, she had mixed and matched several types of potions. But the City must have had its own species of insect to combat. Mariela figured the five types of insecticide potions would cover them.

“Hrm. I see.”

After that exchange, Nierenberg wrote a note and handed it to a soldier who had come for a medical examination.

That night, Malraux had come to pick up the potions as usual.

“Miss Mariela. We would like to order ten of each of the five insecticide potions,” he asked.

Because Mariela was the one who’d asked the Black Iron Freight Corps for a contract of confidentiality, she had no right to complain, but this was roundabout and slow. She would have been able to get the work done sooner if Nierenberg has just made the order on the spot.

To this day, Nierenberg still stuck to the “alchemist from the imperial capital” storyline.

Could he really think that? Mariela wondered as she made the five types of requested potions.

A few days after Mariela supplied the potions, she received a large order for one type in particular.

Really? This one of all things?! Oh, this is bad!

Mariela could guess the pest in question from their request.

She told herself that it was fine. Malraux had reported her potions were effective. But when she scanned the order, she couldn't help but feel that they'd accidentally tacked on some extra zeros!

Where the heck are all these insects breeding? I have to sprinkle some on Sunlight's Canopy, too! This situation was beginning to drain the color from her face.

Mariela believed bugs and people could coexist—because bugs were small.

I mean, they're gross if you look at them too closely!

Well, it wasn't a scientific hypothesis, but a personal one.

There were some bugs covered with eyes and others with bundles of legs. There were caterpillars that hid their eyes and limbs in their gooey shapes. Of course, she'd wanted to observe them to figure them out. But either they moved too quickly, or they were too confounding, because she really couldn't get a good grasp on insects.

And they oozed with juice when you squished them.

Animals are way juicier, people might protest. It was true: When dismembering animals and meat monsters, their blood and sinew went everywhere. This was not a pleasant sight, but Mariela was more overcome with empathy for the pain and cruelty the animals endured. It was totally different from the feeling of the gunk dribbling from an insect.

She had a particular insect in mind.

There were seven deadly sins: gluttony, lust, greed, wrath, pride, envy, sloth. They served as guides for humans to avoid committing wrongdoing. If that was the case, They were the furthest from sin.

This was because They exhibited self-restraint. They did not overeat. They could savor the smallest bit of leftovers—including trash, which was furthest from food. They could survive from surprisingly meager scraps.

This was because They were far from lustful. Some were even chaste. A group

consisting of at least three females could procreate on Their own. There was no reason for Them to succumb to lust, destroying Their bodies in the process.

This was because They had no greed. They were humble creatures, seeking the slightest bit of warmth. There was no doubt They had to turn toward each other to provide warmth and find relief.

This was because They left anger to other creatures. They did not attack humans. On the rare occasions of assault, it was said to be a risk that They'd taken for survival. Compared to creatures that carry diseases, They were much more merciful.

This was because They were not slothful. They continued to plug away during the night, recognizing persistence was needed to obtain food.

This was because They were far from envious. They were cloaked in simple black garb reminiscent of mourning clothes. Their stubborn survival was the embodiment of perseverance.

This was because They quietly stayed alive near arrogant humans. There's no way to guess whether They knew They were unwanted, but it was not an exaggeration to say this was Their way of life, staying in the shadows, out of the public eye, admirable and modest.

Although They possessed all these virtues, the humans called Them the "Black Fiends." And they despised Them.



03



"Gaaaahhh! Here they cooome!!!"

They weren't "coming." This was Their habitat. They must have wanted to prove that the Labyrinth Suppression Forces were the ones intruding. They had a search-and-destroy target marked on their backs; they must have known their fate. It must have made the Black Fiends—the cockroaches—of the fifty-fifth stratum particularly enormous, tough, brutal.

“Aaaargh! Don’t come any closerrr! Fire Wall!” shrieked the magic user, confounded by the Black Fiends and allowing flames to wash over them.

Their exteriors—slick and shiny with oil—burst into flames. However, they kept rustling around as the flames licked their bodies. It was as if they had taken no damage at all.

Over a yard long, the Black Fiends scuttled around, engulfed in flames. It drew the people’s eye, whether they wanted to or not. The texture of their wings, the movement of their legs, and even their little hairs had been magnified. But every soldier of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces was agile and perceptive enough to capture even the slightest of movements.

“Oh, it’s taken flight.”

Bzz-bzz-bzz-bzz.

“Retreat! Retreeeat!!!”

Scurrying around with their backs ablaze, the Black Fiends evolved into flying creatures.

I believe I can fly. For I’m the true king of this great forest!

With the winged roaches spreading flames as they flew, the forest in the fifty-fifth stratum was instantly transformed into a roaring sea of fire. Weishardt slumped over—either from the smoke screen surrounding him or the sheer visual impact of the Black Fiends. When all the members of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces managed to escape to the stratum above, the entire floor was engulfed in flames.

“Hurry and take roll! Treat the injured. No! Better to check on everyone. Physically and psychologically!” roared Leonhardt.

Assigned to each squad, the healing mages assembled to make their report.

“All bodily injuries have been healed. No problems there. However...”

“I’m scared, I’m scared, I’m-scared-I’m-scared-I’m-scared-I’m-scared...”

“Are you serious...? They can...fly...?”

There were a group of soldiers cowering, clutching their heads or cradling

knees as they mumbled.

“Not again...”

Every time they marched into this stratum, the number of soldiers requiring a break had increased.

A month had already passed since the subjugation of the Sea-Floating Pillar, and treatment of the soldiers suffering from exposure to the black new medicine was going smoothly.

But attempts to capture the fifty-fifth stratum had been rough. Though the Labyrinth Suppression Forces hadn't sustained any serious damage, they hadn't even found a lead. As Weishardt grew more haggard with each passing day, Leonhardt was starting to get worried about his younger brother.

Weishardt had despised insects for a very long time.

In the cellar of the Aguinas household, the slumbering alchemists had managed to awaken from their suspended animation. But their lives were cut short, crumbling into salt, perishing from lack of magic or energy.

There was no guarantee the same thing wouldn't happen to the last remaining Alchemist Pact-Bearer. Ever since that incident, the Forces had tried to reduce as much of the burden on the Pact-Bearer as possible. They had become better at distributing the correct type of potion that corresponded to the severity of the wound; started to order more low-and mid-grade potions; used Nierenberg to perform medical exams to scan for magical disorders; and presented her with nutrient-dense cookies. Leonhardt had heard that her complexion had improved, in part from his efforts.

He'd continued to grasp for a way the Labyrinth Suppression Forces could subjugate the Labyrinth on its own without placing a burden on the alchemist, but they might have hit their ceiling. Sure, they had managed to make impressive progress in the past few months—in the grand scheme of things, it had taken over two hundred years to reach the fifty-second stratum. But he wasn't proud of the situation.

“Contact Nierenberg.”

Leonhardt decided to throw potions into the mix. A few days later, they had

one of the five kinds of mid-grade specialized insecticide potions, which demonstrated mind-boggling results, and Weishardt had recovered in a miracle of all miracles. Well, it might have taken him in a weird direction, because his eyes sometimes appeared terrifying. But the new-and-improved Weishardt had let them begin to subjugate the fifty-fifth stratum with a large-scale extermination.



04



It hadn't been long after the subjugation of the Sea-Floating Pillar in the fifty-fourth stratum when the scouts finished their investigation of the fifty-fifth to give their report.

"The fifty-fifth stratum is a warm and verdant forest, and we found no sign of hostile monsters."

Although the Labyrinth Suppression Forces were skeptical, preliminary members went down to the fifty-fifth stratum anyway. Just as the scout had reported, it was indeed a lush forest, smelling of perennial summer. Flowers of many hues bloomed across the ground, and fruit ripening on the trees filled the air with a sweet scent.

They had come in a large group. If this were the Fell Forest, the monsters would have immediately advanced on them en masse. Instead, they saw butterflies flitting around and insects sipping on tree sap.

It was winter outside the Labyrinth. The temperate and abundant forest in the fifty-fifth stratum started to ease the soldiers' caution, and one from the bunch reached out for a piece of fruit hanging from a neighboring tree. It could be found in the wholesale market in the Labyrinth City and fetched a pretty penny. The fruit was bewitchingly red and ripened to perfection—sweet, juicy, golden flesh held together by its velvet skin.

Sure, there were monsters in the Labyrinth, but it could bear fruit, too, alternating types to match the climate of their respective stratum. It was true

that the edible plants became sweeter as they ventured deeper into the Labyrinth, though the reason why was unclear. In this deepest stratum, the soldier had no doubt this would be the best he'd eaten.

"Hey, we're in the middle of an operation. Cut it out," warned a comrade.

But the soldier had already plucked the fruit from the tree. The sugariness of dripping honey reached his nose, enticing him to sink his teeth into its skin.

ZZZZ-ZZZZ-ZZZ-BZZ!

Something began to overflow from the fruit—something that had wormed itself inside, gorging itself on the golden flesh.

"What the—? *Blegh!* Ah! *No!*... AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH..."

The soldier spat out his massive bite, splattering onto the ground to reveal hordes of rounded bugs that scurried under the shelter of a nearby bush. In the piece of fruit in his hand, more bugs poured out of the missing bite, fastening themselves to his fingers or scuttling down all over his neck and torso, under his clothes and armor, to get away.

"—gh... AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH..." The soldier's eyes rolled back in his head before he passed out.

He was the first dropout of the fifty-fifth stratum. Fortunately, he'd spit out all the fruit, meaning there was little damage to his body, but he'd needed extensive therapy for a long time.

It was said that even after he returned to the war front, not only did he not go into the fifty-fifth stratum, but he would no longer eat any kind of fruit. It was fair to say this was the opening of an extremely disastrous nightmare.

The fifty-fifth stratum was the Forest of Black Fiends.

As they continued their investigation, they were finally able to get a full picture: roaches that spanned a yard and appeared with no end in sight.

There was no doubt the soldier had gotten a mouthful of their larvae.

There had been no lie in the scouts' report. There were no hostile monsters. The Black Fiends didn't count—for they had no desire to attack people. They behaved as normal cockroaches, scuttling around, flat bodies slipping into gaps

between vegetation or rocks. Their size didn't change their nature. On the fifty-fifth stratum, they chewed on fruit and fallen leaves, lurking in the shade. They must have grown to this size because the forest was abundant in its harvests.

In Weishardt's opinion, these creatures were the boss of the fifty-fifth stratum. If even a single one remained, the door down to the next stratum wouldn't budge an inch.

On their own, a Black Fiend didn't possess much power to attack. What was particularly horrifying was their defensive power and stamina. They were resistant to every kind of magic, and they never seemed to die—even from attacks that would have easily killed other monsters. Even if their heads were crushed, they could still move. How on earth was that possible?

"They must have more than one brain and heart," the insect summoners of the scouting unit happily suggested.

But all the soldiers of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces who heard these comments scrunched their faces in extreme disgust.

But if it just came down to pure strength, even a C-Rank adventurer could come to defeat one in time in an isolated space.

With the Gold Lion General Leonhardt leading the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, it was possible to defeat them...if the Black Fiends didn't run away.

In comparison, the monsters in the Fell Forest that came out in droves were almost cute. These Black Fiends were an assault on their vision with their color, form, and movements, and their uneasy rustling was an affront to their ears. These abysmal, sophisticated creatures were psychological terrorists. It was beyond the scope of magic. And yet they still ran away. Perhaps a strategic hit-and-run?

In the conference room, Weishardt cursed their craftiness as thoroughly as spoken language would allow, but he didn't have any good ideas to battle them.

The Black Fiends boasted their resilience. Pouring boiling water on them had no effect. The women in the Forces proposed the use of liquid detergent, raining soapy water on the creatures. But it dripped down the tree branches, ineffective on the Black Fiends who escaped through gaps in the foliage. In the

fantastical scene of the wind blowing soapy bubbles through the forest, all the soldiers could see were the Black Fiends soaring into the sky in triumph. Stores selling soap made a slight profit, including Sunlight's Canopy, but the Labyrinth Suppression Forces sustained heavy psychological damage.

Frustrated by this mission, Weishardt had once burned the entire stratum to the ground with the help of magic users. In front of the blazing forest, he had roared with laughter—which was what nightmares were made of.

I can't tell which one's the fiend, thought Leonhardt.

In their astonishment, the forest had returned to its original state the next day. And, of course, the Black Fiends were still there.

Well, it wasn't totally back to normal. Without fruit hanging from the trees, the remaining Black Fiends had shrunk a size. They must have been starving—as they stole the provisions from the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, who were immobilized by sheer shock at the regenerated forest.

“I'm guessing the eggs hidden in the rocks and soil escaped the fire—and hatched with explosive growth. I'm impressed by their survival,” the insect summoners marveled.

If only these Black Fiends weren't the boss! They would have captured them and brought them home!

Weishardt noticed the Black Fiends devouring the provisions and silently hurled fire magic at them...and the insect summoners. As a result, the Forces were compelled to retreat for the day.

Burned to the ground again, huh? Next time, we need to keep an eye on the provisions...

In his room in the base of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, Leonhardt rubbed his eyes in exhaustion.

As with the Sea-Floating Pillar, they were going to need to buy time without attacking the stratum. This was a better strategy than allowing the Labyrinth Suppression Forces to get totally annihilated and becoming more common as they reached deeper levels. And it would be especially important in this case—where the Black Fiends were strong but prone to scurrying away. Even if the

entire stratum was set on fire, it would regenerate in a day.

Leonhardt was thankful that no one had collapsed from lack of oxygen, but the real problem was that Weishardt seemed all out of whack. He was pushing himself too hard; after all, his opponents were his detested bugs—and *cockroaches* at that. Weishardt had practically become a different person altogether.

Leonhardt thought back to when Malraux had brought the specialized insecticide potions from the alchemist.

Weishardt had inched his face closer with blazing eyes. “You’ve made me wait for too long, Malraux! This must be the medicine that’ll wipe them out!”

Malraux started and jumped back, then answered, “Indeed. Here is the recommended way to use it.” He offered the instructions Mariela had written and included with the specialized insecticide potions.

It seemed the application type depended on the target insect. It could be mixed with bait, burned as incense, or diluted with water and sprayed.

“Heh! Heh-heh-heh-heh... With this... Let us make preparations, on the double! All the materials ought to be in the base! Get ready by tomorrow’s subjugation mission! There are still twelve hours before dawn!”

After he scanned the instructions for the specialized insecticide potions, savoring every word, Weishardt ordered an all-nighter as if it was the most reasonable thing in the world.

“Sir!”

The aide took the instructions and the specialized insecticide potions, turning away to handle this urgent and important matter. Pulling an all-nighter wasn’t a big deal—especially seeing how the Black Fiends had tormented Weishardt, who had become murderous with rage. Gauging from the dark circles under his eyes, it was obvious he was sleeping less than anyone else. Apparently, his older brother Leonhardt wasn’t the only one who worried about his eerie transformation.

The soldiers prayed: *We’ll do our best so you can rest.*

Their wish might have been granted. Or it may have been that the potions were that effective. The next day, reports indicated the Black Fiends had ceased movement immediately after eating bait laced with one of the potions. All their eggs disappeared, too.

“Let’s shift into mass production! Use the square acreage of the stratum to estimate their population! We’ll kill every last one of them!” Weishardt boomed, eye bags and all, taking on the appearance of an unhinged dictator. “Exterminate them! Eradicate them! Don’t let a single one go!”

And they really needed to annihilate them to capture the fifty-fifth stratum. Their enemies were the Black Fiends; the statement was cruel but not inaccurate.

“Sleep, Weishardt,” ordered Leonhardt, worried about his haggard younger brother.

I don’t want to poison these benign creatures, even if they’re cockroaches... But they’re the stratum boss, which leaves us no choice...

Leonhardt didn’t think much of their appearance, feeling sorry that they were judged for their looks. But that didn’t stop him from solemnly handing down orders to the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, who were wild with excitement at the idea of defeating the creatures.



05



“Whaaat? Again? Oh, that’s way too many. Nah, that’s impossible; I mean, Sieg’s not here.”

“How about we think about ways to get it done instead of making excuses?” Malraux suggested—all logic—as Mariela grumbled.

It might have been a great pep talk from a charismatic boss, but it was ineffective on Mariela. All she wanted was someone to make cocoa for her when she got tired, cook and eat meals with her, and pacify her when she did

something stupid.

In short, she needed those sharp comic jabs to balance out her airheaded nature. Without them, she became very cranky. With “nah” as her catchphrase, Mariela was already starting to transition into *Marinah-la*. She might as well have been in her terrible twos. She was regressing. Definitely.

“One of the ingredients is sarsoral stones processed in slime acid,” Mariela started. “But we need five to ten times the amount to make one potion. It’s impossible for me to lift something that heavy alone. And you need me to make a scrumptious sweet treat for bait? What if I accidentally eat it?”

If Malraux had made a snappy comeback—“Jeez, don’t eat it”—Mariela’s mood might have improved.

“Which means it’s poisonous to humans...?” he muttered instead. “In that case, we’ll outsource the processing of sarsoral stones, since it doesn’t need Drops of Life. You can give us your insight for appropriate bait, and we’ll outsource its creation, too.”

The suggestion was to alleviate the burden on Mariela and help Weishardt get better from his weakened mental state. Malraux forged ahead on the work, moving forward in a practical manner.

“I will bring an estimate tomorrow—which will exclude the cost of the outsourcing,” he said, hoping it would be the coup de grâce to whip Mariela into work mode. Not that he had any hostility toward her.

But this was why Mariela’s mouth remained in a perpetual frown until the very next day when Caroline and the other girls chatted with her over sweet treats.

Urgent news reached Weishardt’s ears: “The alchemist is in a sour mood.” He ordered additional sweets be sent to Sunlight’s Canopy. Nierenberg received the order to “cheer her up,” which was not really his forte, and he couldn’t stop Mariela from gobbling up one snack after the next. For *Marinahla* to get her way by throwing a tantrum displayed the weaknesses in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces’ management system.

Ever since Sieg’s group had left for the Ahriman Springs, Mariela had adopted

a sulky look, and her figure had expanded little by little. *Chubbyela* didn't know whether she was sullen or swollen. Until Sieg's group returned, she devoured snacks as she plugged away making potions alone.



06



At the edge of the slums, a large atelier opened in a certain abandoned building near the outer wall.

It was an atelier in name only. With its recent expansion, it had boards for walls and a dirt floor. No one could live there because it didn't meet the Labyrinth City's building standards. Plus, even the residents of the slum preferred not to take up residence near the outer wall, where the Fell Forest lurked on the other side. It was an ideal place to secure a large plot of land.

The Labyrinth Suppression Forces hauled sarsoral stones mined from the Ahriman Springs, slime acid, a wide selection of medicines, and pungent foodstuffs into the atelier. There had been people assigned to process these materials: Some sat hammering the sarsoral stones into tiny pieces and putting them in buckets, while others carried the buckets to an appointed spot. There were those who carefully poured the powdered sarsoral stones into tanks filled with slime acid, and others who lowered the temperature of the tanks with cooling magic.

Though it was commonly called "slime acid," wild slimes spat out a cocktail of components. By feeding domesticated slimes a fixed diet, you could obtain a simple acidic liquid of high concentration. The acid in this atelier came from slimes who were fed eggs, putrid vegetables, and yellow powder taken from hot springs. It generated heat when dissolved in water. At a glance, sarsoral stones appeared to be dry minerals but produced water and generated heat when dissolved in slime acid. If large quantities were left unsupervised, the tank could theoretically heat up to the point of danger. As they worked, they reduced its temperature with cooling magic.

The solution contained necessary and unnecessary components, which necessitated some filtering. The varying boiling points of the components allowed one to separate them into their usable parts. An outsider would have no idea what they were observing. With high-level alchemical skills, you could mass-produce this concoction as long as your magic didn't run out. But without these skills, it required a series of complex steps, equipment, and labor.

The ones overseeing this operation and giving directions to the workers were the engineers involved in the creation of new medicine under the Aguinas family. Many were alchemists who had experience working in the imperial capital. Although they couldn't make potions in the Labyrinth City, they could provide their insight. Half of them were survivors, *materials* for the red new medicine.

In a corner of the atelier, Caroline and her father Royce were having a discussion with a magic technician about magical tools that could optimize the work. Because the magic technicians had helped develop the "mixing machine for medicine manufacturing," they were acquainted with Caroline, kindly lending her an ear.

Mariela gazed at her excited friend from a bit of a distance away.

Outsourced due to Mariela's protests, the steps to process the sarsoral stones and develop a delectable treat had been assigned to the Aguinas family. When Mariela first heard this, she was anxious that she'd caused trouble for Lady Carol.

"In all truth," Caroline had admitted with a relieved smile, "it helped us out when Lord Weishardt came to us with this proposal."

Ever since the Aguinas family incident, the manufacturing of new medicine had halted. With their only business in selling potions and new medicine, the family had lost most of their income.

They generated the bare minimum of income to support Caroline, her father, and the rest of their small family. But they had to feed the alchemists from the imperial capital; alchemists who'd been involved in manufacturing the new medicine; and the surviving slaves used as *materials* for the red new medicine. This whittled away their assets with little they could do to stop it. The

alchemists from the capital knew too much about the new medicine—and particularly about the Sacrificials—making it far more dangerous for them to return to the capital. Slaves with physical deficiencies had been prioritized as materials, and their bodies had weakened as they had been forcibly bedridden. No one would buy them.

Caroline was working hard to support these slaves with her earnings made from medicine, but it wasn't enough to make ends meet.

This was why she jumped at the chance of creating “roach-icidal sweets,” an order from the Labyrinth Suppression Forces. It was a onetime thing, but since there were cockroaches in the City, they could count on a steady income, even after their work for the Forces was done. Even without specialized insecticide potions, they could expect a sufficient effect on non-monster insects from the extracts of sarsoral stones. Plus, the manufacturing of these poison sweets required relatively expensive equipment for processing the stones, so they had no competitors in the Labyrinth City. If the initial expenses were covered by the sum that they received from the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, they might be able to provide for the alchemists from the imperial capital and the slaves.

Caroline had had it rough. She'd been engaged to a man twenty years her senior to establish family ties but called off that union because of her older brother's disgrace. She'd been elected the head of a family that had seen better days and now supported alchemists from the imperial capital and slaves.

Whatever their reason, the alchemists and slaves began to collaborate with the girl who was always trying her best.

“And how are the killer treats going?” the lieutenant general of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, Weishardt, had asked when the atelier had begun its operations.

“Oh my, Lord Weishardt,” Royce, Caroline's father, replied in greeting. “It's good to see you. Work with the sarsoral stones is proceeding as planned, and the results are quite satisfactory. Carol, go on. Show him.” He left the tour to Caroline.

Mariela had succeeded in separating Caroline's father from his older brother Ruiz—the one who had been possessing him. Royce was in recovery, having

been bedridden for years, and he sometimes struggled to maneuver his wheelchair among all the tools and materials strewn over the floor of the atelier.

“This way, Lord Weishardt.” Appointed as his guide, Caroline led him to the back of the atelier. She answered his questions about the production equipment with no hesitation; Weishardt could tell she was the one running the place.

Finally, Caroline showed Weishardt to a small laboratory constructed inside. There they were researching the ratio of materials that would make the treats perfectly enticing for the Black Fiends.

“We’re collaborating with Mariela, an alchemist from the imperial capital, to make adjustments,” Caroline explained, gesturing to Mariela.

Although their social positions differed, Mariela was her friend and a colleague in making and selling medicine. She’d helped a lot with the development of the delectable sweets, too. From Mariela’s point of view, all she’d done was pass on work to her friend and provide information from the Library, but Caroline was grateful for the help with her family’s predicament. This time, she’d invited Mariela to the laboratory to properly report her distinguished service to Weishardt.

When Caroline beckoned, Mariela slowly trudged over.

“My gratitude for your assistance,” Weishardt expressed.

There were many eyes within the atelier. This was more than what the lieutenant general of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces ought to express to a civilian collaborator. Weishardt might have presented as stoic, but he admired Mariela in his heart.

When I heard about the outsourcing of the sarsoral stones and sweets, I couldn’t understand why, but...I shouldn’t have underestimated an intelligent alchemist who survived for two hundred years. She’s got good judgment. To save the engineers and slaves used as materials by getting the family to manufacture a portion of the specialized insecticide potions...

With this project, we’ll have a way to manufacture a treat laced with

insecticide for household use. It'll be possible for them to generate enough cash to survive. No, not just them. With this business, it may even be possible to employ slum residents if they can just secure a market for the items.

Weishardt was ashamed of himself for putting all his energy into the Labyrinth subjugation and failing to take the Aguinases into consideration. A number of those working in the atelier had limited mobility or physical constraints, but each was appointed work that they were capable of accomplishing in this assembly line for sarsoral stones. In the Labyrinth City, there was an abundance of magical tools, which could be used to manufacture products. Even then, “skill-based production” was commonplace. It was rare for those with no skills to produce goods in assembly lines in ateliers.

Even this process was this alchemist's idea, huh...? In sight of this new manufacturing process, Weishardt shivered at Mariela's perceptivity.

The idea had come when Caroline was consulting Mariela. “Those with only one hand cannot break the stones,” she'd said.

“Then leave that to those who can. Or use a magical tool instead. Those guys with missing hands can do something else,” she had replied without much thought.

“...I agree. Let's move forward with that!”

The concept of an assembly line had not existed at the time, yet Caroline had managed to map this idea from Mariela's incomplete thought. A genius worthy of being an heir of the Aguinases family.

Oh yeah, I used to have Sieg knead most of the general oil, huh? I hate doing it myself. Though now it would be done with the magical mixing tool. I kind of wanna eat meat fried in general oil for dinner. I haven't had that in a while, mused Mariela next to Caroline, completely overcome with thoughts of orc meat. Maybe she'd contributed to this process... Maybe.

But Weishardt was none the wiser, letting his misunderstandings snowball. *From last time, the lady alchemist has...well...a very...improved physique... I have no doubt she has a lot on her mind.*

“Mm,” he offered to no one in particular.

Caroline continued explaining the roach-icidal sweets. “The sample is done. We tinkered the original recipe. For a normal type of creature, I have no doubt this will be the best.”

“Mm, may I open it?”

Caroline handed him a wide-mouthed vial containing a few sweets that were the size of a human mouthful. When he opened it, an acrid odor spread through the room. It wasn’t a smell that would whet a human’s appetite—slightly sour and bittersweet. Weishardt and Caroline were particularly unacquainted with this odor as those who had maids and servants waiting on their hands and feet.

“Packs quite a punch for its size.”

“Yes. They will be lured by this scent,” Caroline promised.

Rustle-rustle-rustle.

An uninvited guest had immediately turned up to further prove her point. It wasn’t a one-yard thing from the fifty-fifth stratum, but an exceptionally ordinary type of roach. Of course, its scuffles were muted, quiet.

But thanks to his outstanding hearing, the lieutenant general of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces did not miss it. The nightmare of the fifty-fifth stratum passed through his mind. He remembered the abominable luster of their bodies. He hid the tension from his expression, so no one noticed it in the rest of his body.

It’s here. On the slanted wall behind me. Judging from the sound, it’s about one and a half yards above the ground. It will come into view in three...two...

PLAP!

Caroline moved before it even came into Weishardt’s field of view. In her hand, she held something resembling a flexible riding whip, though the tip was too wide and large for one. It whizzed at an impressive speed for the daughter of a noble family, but Caroline was frail. Her attack didn’t crush it, but it did stop moving for a moment.

“Ice,” Caroline chanted without missing a beat.

It had little power, but it was sufficient to trap the thing in a chunk of ice.

“My apologies for such an unsightly display, Lord Weishardt.”

With the tip of her whip, Caroline skillfully scooped up the ice, nonchalantly tossing it into a slime tank. The movement was smooth and elegant and almost reassuring. After dealing with the creature, she collected the vial of the poison sweets back from Weishardt and closed the lid to prevent any more summonings. Their fingertips lightly brushed as they made the exchange, and Caroline smiled sweetly.

Ba-dump. The sound from Weishardt’s chest signaled the start of something.

Wh-what...? What’s this...?! He grew flustered at his own throbbing heartbeat. For all his life, he’d been assisting his older brother in defeating the Labyrinth. He had never been exposed to this emotion before.

His brother Leonhardt had specialized in “Lion’s Roar” to use in the military. This skill had a higher hereditary chance of being passed down to a direct descendant than a more distant relative, meaning Leonhardt’s children would succeed the family of Margrave Schutzenwald. This was a matter of course to Weishardt, and he didn’t have a rebellious bone in his body. But to prevent the unlikely chance of a quarrel over inheritance, he was forbidden to marry or even become engaged until Leonhardt’s heir reached adulthood.

Weishardt prioritized the subjugation of the Labyrinth and understood the dangers of the strata past fifty better than anyone else. He had no time for love, which was convenient because he felt giving gifts and courting daughters of noble households was a waste of time. Weishardt recognized his own marriage was a political tool. After Leonhardt’s child grew up and was formally established as the family heir, he had the vague idea that he would probably be sent out to marry to make family ties.

In other words, Weishardt was absolutely clueless when it came to love—even as a superior specimen with “only” an attractive face, muscular figure, and sharp mind who came from a good family and who was popular with the ladies.

“Is something wrong?” Caroline looked worried as she peered at Weishardt, who was acting strange.

Sh-she’s s-so cute... Weishardt involuntarily gritted his teeth. Even though he was poised most of the time, his facial muscles were refusing to behave. He

knew his face was flushed. Was Caroline really this charming?

No, this is bad. Calm down. This is nothing more than a moment's thought! I mean, just compare her to someone else! She's nothing special!

Weishardt recalled the scene and the faces that he'd encountered when he came to the atelier.

It was typical for there to be hordes of people working in the atelier. He could imagine the introductions of the introverted engineers ("I love research!") and the penal laborers ("Yes, hello, sir, I'm a damned reprobate"). Then there was Royce Aguinas, who had lost his mind until recently.

I knew it; Caroline is lovel— No! Why am I comparing her to men?

When he lifted his head, he zeroed in on the very young woman behind Caroline... Nine out of ten people wouldn't give her a second glance. Well, maybe two or three would, based on her unusual physique. An alchemist in the shape of a sweet treat...

Yes! I knew it! Caroline is lovely...!!!

Was the difference between them part of a scheme? Could she have really gone this far? Did she eat pastries and gain weight on purpose? Was he really unable to even grasp the cunning of the sole alchemist in the Labyrinth City that was even more profound than the Labyrinth?

"Um, you're pale. Are you feeling ill after all.....?" Caroline approached him, looking worried.

"I...I'm taking a break for the rest of the day!" he shouted for no reason whatsoever, hurriedly dragging his soldier away.

Even after leaving Caroline, Weishardt's heart was pounding out of his chest.

He felt like he could hear it everywhere, enough to block out the rustling of *things* lurking around.





“And then, while you were gone, Sieg, Lady Carol started an atelier to make sweets infused with insecticide. The processed sarsoral stones are brought here from underground; I refine them into mid-grade specialized insecticide potions; and then the Labyrinth Suppression Forces take them to Lady Carol’s atelier.”

As she sat in front of the fireplace sipping a cup of cocoa, Mariela filled in Sieg on everything that happened while he was at the Ahriman Springs. Sieg rubbed his eyes, as if she’d suddenly reverted back to *Chubbyela* during their conversation.

“So that’s why Lord Weishardt keeps coming to Sunlight’s Canopy...?” murmured Sieg.

Mariela was present during the tour of the atelier, but she hadn’t caught on that there was something eating away at his heart.

“And then Lady Carol conquered the cockroach in front of Lord Weishardt!” That was all Mariela had reported to Sieg.

Of course, not even Sieg could pick up on all the nuances from Mariela’s paltry explanation. Lynx might have possessed the secret new ability to guess everything from a single mention of “Mariela,” but alas, Sieg did not.

But he did notice that ever since that day, Weishardt had started coming to Sunlight’s Canopy in a soldier’s uniform at the times when Caroline routinely stopped in. He tried to blend in with the soldiers requiring treatment, apparently in “disguise.” Not that anything could hide his natural charm. After all, Weishardt’s and Leonhardt’s faces were famous enough to be recognized. Even if he swapped his clothes to a lower-ranking uniform, he wouldn’t have been able to pass off as a total stranger. It would seem the genius was blinded by inexperience and love. Those around him knew exactly what he was trying to do; they were only uncertain about whether they should just pretend not to

notice.

“Good day, Lady Carol. You’re looking lovely as always. I was wondering if Nierenberg was in?”

“My, Lord Weis. I’m flattered. The doctor is that way.”

Wondering if Nierenberg was in? The doctor had settled in his seat obviously in sight from the entrance to Sunlight’s Canopy—their resident monster-warding statue. But it would seem that all Weishardt could see was Caroline. The shop’s owner and the sole alchemist in the Labyrinth City might as well have been invisible to him.

And at some point, he’d started copying Mariela by calling Caroline, “Lady Carol,” who called him “Weis” in return. When he flashed her his princely smile, it had 20 percent more sparkles in it than usual. With every visit, he bombarded her with treats and flowers, but the person in question, Caroline, was oblivious to it all.

To the delight of the regular customers at Sunlight’s Canopy, his flowers decorated and spruced up the store. And most of the treats found themselves comfortably in their stomachs. In fact, the exchanges between the heated lieutenant general and the oblivious girl had become the new special at Sunlight’s Canopy.

“If you are here to discuss work, the examination room is open,” Caroline suggested, shooing him away, even though he’d come to see her. How pitiful.

Even the famed fiend, Nierenberg, couldn’t help but lend a helping hand.

“If it’s the usual business, we can talk about it here,” he said, and the pair moved to a corner. It had become a place to exchange innocuous information.

“And when will the *pastries* be ready?”

“Approximately two to three days. We need manpower for their *delivery*. Come with us, Nierenberg.”

“Understood.”

With Mariela churning out more mid-grade insecticide potion the day before, they were able to gather enough to get started. A massive quantity of sweets

was now being manufactured in Caroline's atelier. They had created a large-scale medicine mixer, which let them mass-produce the treats, which were brought to the base of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces. It had taken time to get the atelier on its feet, but they were still able to drastically reduce the production time of the treats that Mariela would have had to make by hand.

These pesticidal treats were made from wheat, potatoes, onions, sugar turnip dregs, orc lard, lynus wheat rind and skin, waste products from the wholesale market, including monster lard, marrow, and the skin and dregs of fruits and vegetables. They were then either ground or minced, before mixing them with specialized insecticide potions. With the sheer quantity of ingredients, just accomplishing this was a huge task. After the ingredients were kneaded together, they were rounded by hand, dried, and then sealed in a bug-proof container. It could be said that this was only possible due to the masses of people who devoted themselves to it day and night and the efficiency of the magical tools they utilized.

For days in a row, Caroline visited the atelier during shift changes to assess their progress—and note their health. Her managerial style motivated those working in the atelier.

"These are strategic goods using rare potions. I cannot provide any more details, but they are essential in determining the future of the Labyrinth City," she would say, reminding them of the importance of their work.

After the last shipment had been sent to the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, the former "materials" and "managers"—the slaves and engineers—experienced a budding feeling of solidarity. There was even talk among them that they wanted to keep working at the atelier, which was a happy miscalculation for all parties.

When he caught wind of her excellence, Weishardt's feelings for Caroline swelled more and more. That said, he hadn't realized that as long as she managed the atelier, the Black Fiends would continue to lurk in her shadows.





A few days later, the Labyrinth Suppression Forces had received the entire batch of poison treats and headed for the final battle with the Black Fiends.

“Fortunes be with you,” Caroline had said as they left.

Equipped with the sweets and her words of encouragement, there was nothing that scared Weishardt anymore.

Well, he still hated bugs, but now the thoughts of the Black Fiends were accompanied by Caroline’s heroic *PLAT!* as she did away with cockroaches, and he became calm again.

“I suppose fire magic is fine, but ice magic is more effective,” Caroline had instructed.

Weishardt had stepped up his ice magic. He would no longer make the same mistake of shooting fire magic in the chaos. In fact, he was close to earning the new nickname of the “Ice Prince,” blasting magic as he heard that dreaded *rustle-rustle*.

The plan of subjugating the “Black Fiend Swarm” in the fifty-fifth stratum was simple. First, a small unit containing mages would shoot fire magic at the stratum. On this stratum, there were fixed intervals of downpours—as though rain flooded out of holes at the bottom of the fifty-fourth stratum. They would time the spells in between the rain when the trees were dry. Even if the whole stratum burned to the ground, these rainfalls would extinguish the fire, allowing the forest to regenerate at a staggering speed. The eggs left behind by the decimated Black Fiends would hatch, and the young would be nourished by the abundant forest, springing back into shape. It took one night for the forest to regenerate, including the Black Fiends. This would be the time to scatter the treats. As they went through a growth spurt, the Black Fiends would be ravenous for nourishment. Although they normally fled from the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, this growth period was the only time they approached the army for its provisions. They would have to devour every last one of the poisonous treats available.

To disperse the treats required speed. If they were careless, the next rainfall

might come, washing away the odor of the sweets and causing the potion to leak out of them. This operation called for all hands on deck: from Leonhardt's horses to the Forces' raptors. With the infantry and cavalry hauling the sweets, they were akin to large-scale merchant caravans.

Right around the time when the fire had been extinguished in the great forest, the troop reached the stratum above it. Since bosses didn't get revived in this labyrinth, the fifty-fourth stratum had become a safe zone ever since the defeat of the Sea-Floating Pillar. After the pillar was destroyed, the stratum became a shoal of sea caves, and the strange fish appearing as mermaids were never seen again, perhaps returning to the deep sea. Either way, it became possible for the Labyrinth Suppression Forces to occupy the area near the stairs connecting the strata. Now the soldiers were waiting for the cue to rush into the fifty-fifth stratum.

"Commence the operation to subjugate the swarm of Black Fiends on the fifty-fifth stratum! All troops, move out!" boomed Leonhardt.

The soldiers charged down the stairs in succession, almost gleeful compared to their previous loathing as they plunged into the fifty-fifth stratum.

"I heard that they flip over and vanish when they eat these poison treats."

"Seriously? Nice! I wanna see it!"

The soldiers whispered to each other before the start of the operation. A feeding was always a fascinating sight, whether it was an animal or an insect. Even when the insect's mouth was a weird and unknown thing, they wanted to observe this scene—especially if it had promises of being packed with drama.

The operation to poison the Black Fiends piqued the soldiers' curiosity and childlike cruelty. Plus, the chances were that they wouldn't need to fight in hand-to-hand combat. It might as well have been a picnic.

"Don't get careless! We're not done until we get back to the base!" shouted Nierenberg.

But even his voice was unconvincing. It was close to a teacher lecturing, "You're on this field trip until you get home." Except the soldiers weren't toting around their snacks—but three lethal potions.

The carefree attitude of Sunlight's Canopy must have rubbed off on him. Had he grown soft? Nierenberg frowned slightly, lazily stroked his long beard, and headed to the stratum stairs to help scatter the treats.

As they got closer to the stairs, they noticed the temperature rising, humid and hot. In its perennial summer, the fallen rain on the fifty-fifth stratum must have evaporated and risen to this floor. The monsters couldn't move between strata, but it would seem the air could circulate between levels.

From cool coastal caverns to a balmy summer forest. When they stepped into the fifty-fifth stratum, they could no longer feel the coolness of the floor above. Even upon the defeat of the boss on a stratum, the climate remained unchanged—albeit it could better regulate climate when the boss was present. Though they had scorched the fifty-fifth stratum more times than they could count, the oxygen levels hadn't decreased at all.

Nierenberg led his assigned squad and began to dash toward their designated area. He realized he was damp with sweat in the tropical atmosphere. The newly regenerated forest was still sparse, and light filtered through semitransparent foliage. Even Nierenberg felt more alive sucking in fresh air and smelling new leaves. If it weren't for the silhouettes of the Black Fiends everywhere, he might have wanted to take a leisurely stroll.

When they arrived at their destination, Nierenberg's group began to lay out the pesticidal sweets.

A black shadow wasted no time following his path, taking the treat from the spot. As he pretended not to notice, Nierenberg silently scattered more on the ground. Although he didn't particularly abhor the Black Fiends, he didn't exactly *want* to see them, either.

If the air hadn't been cycled out, they would have suffocated, which would have been bad news. He thought as he finished settling up the sweets and went back the way he came. With a subtle glance to his side, he could confirm Black Fiends lurking in the shadows of grass—flipped over with their legs twitching.

I guess this is interesting.

Their movement ground to a halt before the light pouring from the ceiling seemed to sweep away their physical forms. Though it hadn't been long since

they'd hatched, their short lives had ended, evaporating into the light. Although if any eggs were left, it would all be for naught.

Jeez, it's balmy down here.

The heat rising from the ground after the rain was unbearable. He felt like he was being steamed from below. This might have been the optimal temperature for those things, but it was unpleasant to humans.

Ah, is it because this climate is suited for them? Nierenberg mused as he made his way to the meeting spot in front of the stairs.

In the Labyrinth, the climate on each stratum had been set to accommodate its monsters. That was why the oxygen levels never changed, even when the fifty-fifth stratum burned to the ground. These monsters might not possess the skills to fight, but they did multiply and regenerate with impressive speed.

About half the soldiers had already returned to the meeting spot. The backup troops were technically allowed to withdraw after making their report, but they hung around, standing firmly in a line in a corner. They must have wanted to witness the door to the next stratum opening upon the boss's defeat.

I guess it's fine this time.

There were few chances for backup troops to witness the defeat of a stratum boss. Plus, it wasn't as though they were just loitering. And there was nothing better than learning from experience. Leonhardt and Weishardt must have come to the same conclusion, as they hadn't ordered the formation of backup troops to retreat.

"Except you."

"Ow!"

Nierenberg slammed his fist down on a soldier he knew. Although the soldier was an excellent member of the main force, he was perched on a rock in a hidden spot to rest.

"Hey, Doc. My ass is nice 'n' warm here. Have a seat. Warmin' yourself up in a hot place. Weird, huh?" The soldier chuckled.

"We're in the middle of an operation. Don't let your guard down."

“You’re so stuffy, Doc. It’ll be over any minute, right?”

Nierenberg ushered the sluggish soldier back into the line. There was the distant sound of rustling vegetation. The soldiers assigned to farther areas to distribute the poison-filled treats must have returned.

What an unsatisfying end to those Black Fiends who had tormented them.

As he headed toward Leonhardt and Weishardt, Nierenberg looked out over the calm Labyrinth Suppression Forces, knitting his brows together and tracing a finger along the stubble on his jaw.

Mm... Hmm? Something’s bothering me...

“Thanks for your hard work, Nierenberg. It shouldn’t be long now.”

Leonhardt thanked the returning soldiers and gazed around the area near the stairs. The operation had gone smoothly, and a new staircase was going to appear when the last Black Fiend fell.

“I wonder what kind of stratum we will see next...?” muttered Leonhardt to no one in particular.

This stratum was hot. Blistering. After the rain, the steam was scorching. Even the soldier from before had claimed that his rock perch was warm.

“Since this one was so hot, I take it,” responded Weishardt, who had relentlessly set fire to the fifty-fifth stratum, making it even hotter.

If the Black Fiends hadn’t needed oxygen, the operation might have been even more difficult.

What if...? Nierenberg managed to piece together a single hypothesis. *What if there was a stratum where the monsters didn’t need oxygen?*

Would the air be replenished if the oxygen was depleted?

What if this stratum was heated from below?

Nierenberg crouched down and touched the ground with his hand. His eyes opened wide. The ground was unnaturally hot. He could feel it shaking, boiling from below.

It happened right at that moment. The last of the Black Fiends must have died

out, because the ground right next to the stairs leading to the upper stratum weakened and began to rise with a groan.

“Run!”

It was difficult to tell which came first, Nierenberg’s shout or the opening of the stairs leading to the fifty-sixth stratum, but the way opened with a blast of hot, reeking gas that transformed the area into a zone of death.



09



Blistering gas mushroomed up, shaking the ground, and became a barricade separating the strata.

Shh-rrumble. This low groan was nothing compared to the heat and toxic compounds released in the air.

A cloud of dust swirled up with the thick gray smoke, reaching all the way up to the ceiling of the fifty-fifth stratum.

Some ways away, Nierenberg had caught a whiff of an offensive smell. He whipped around, turning his gaze from the ceiling to the source of the smoke, witnessing soldiers lying on the ground.

From the tremors and odorous gas, his comrades began to collapse with audible thuds. This stirred the soldiers to believe it was an assault from the lower stratum.

“Get away from the stairs!” Nierenberg tried to shout, but it was lost in the explosion. It did not reach the soldiers. Before the group could rush toward their fallen comrades, they fell to the ground.

The Labyrinth Suppression Forces had no way to handle an invisible poisonous gas that rapidly reached its evil tentacles toward them. Was this the end?

“All troops, follow me!”

At that moment, the Labyrinth Suppression Forces were jolted with

motivation—that could have almost been coercion.

They didn't hear his voice. He didn't give them concrete directions. But every single member of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces knew they had to follow him.

The Gold Lion General Leonhardt. His skill Lion's Roar increased the abilities of his followers and allowed them to function as a group with a single will. He knew that this skill—of powerful charisma—was their only hope of escape.

The chaos instantly died down, and the will of all the soldiers focused on Leonhardt.

"Weis, block it. Even just for a little bit. Nierenberg, do we have any way to deal with this?" Leonhardt asked.

It was more than enough for Weishardt to pick up on his orders. He created a massive chunk of ice that contained most of his magic, a conical icicle as big as the tip of a steeple, and drove it into the stairs emitting the gas. The point plowed through the stairs to the lower stratum as if delivering the finishing blow to a monster. Under Weishardt, the mages cast ice magic to reinforce the icicle and fix it in place.

"This gas dissolves in water. Dampen a cloth and cover your mouth with it. Let's evacuate to high ground; it's heavier than the air," Nierenberg explained.

Leonhardt nodded at his straightforward explanation, turning his gaze to the fallen soldiers near the stratum stairs. "Take care of the troops," he ordered the remaining men. "Use a wet cloth as a mask! All healers and cavalry extricate the injured! Conjurers support them with wind magic! The rest of you follow me!"

Leonhardt directed all the soldiers with the aid of his skill. From his voice, they knew he would save everyone, and in reassurance, they immediately used lifestyle magic to dampen hand towels or cloaks and wrapped them around their mouths.

In particular, the soldiers and backup troops who had toured and gathered materials at the Ahriman Springs were of great help. They remembered, as they regained their composure, that this was the smell of the gas that had gushed forth from the hot springs.

They had brought back two types of minerals back from the mountains. One was the sarsoral stones, and the other was yellow clods. Both were materials needed for the specialized insecticide potions, and the yellow stuff was mixed into the bait fed to the slimes that produced the acid. There was a colorless poisonous gas that permeated the area where they collected these clods, and they'd been thoroughly warned to be careful: If they could no longer smell it, it was already too late. Before they went foraging, they'd received proper training where they learned the characteristics of the gas and how to deal with it in cases of emergency.

With efficiency, the soldiers placed masks on themselves and those around them and began to evacuate. Those who could use wind magic sent a breeze toward Nierenberg's group as they headed to rescue the fallen soldiers, protecting them from the poison gas. The rescue group placed the injured on the raptors carrying the pesticide-laced sweets, and healers performed first aid.

"Hurry! There's no time."

The icicle plugging up the hole was beginning to melt from the heat of the gas. The gas gave a high-pitched whine as it whistled through the gaps forming between them. Nierenberg's rescue group managed to collect all the injured, joining up with the rest of the Forces just as the icicle was blown away with a loud thud and gas began to spew forward again.

"Go! Go! Go!"

The elite halberdiers at the front of the army cut down trees blocking their way, clearing a path of retreat through the forest. The Labyrinth Suppression Forces scrambled through vegetation and trampled the road at full speed. Their destination was the only small hill in this stratum. They ran and ran, but the odor only got progressively stronger, and they knew the invisible tentacles of evil were bearing down on them.

Run! Run! *Run!* As long as they could still detect the smell, they were in the clear. Not a single soldier fell by the wayside. Even though they were encouraged by no one in particular, they sprinted up the hill to their destination. On their way, along the cleared path to the peak, the archers fired anti-undead silver arrows that they always kept in reserve. If the gas corroded

silver, it would turn them black.

“Call roll! Use potions if your eyes or noses are in pain! Or if you have difficulty breathing!” yelled Weishardt.

The Labyrinth Suppression Forces lined up at the top of the hill in accordance with his directions. All of them carried potions, albeit low-and mid-grade ones. Many of the soldiers who’d reached the hill without losing consciousness were in bad shape from the poison gas, and the healers alone weren’t enough to help them out. With Nierenberg, the healers administered treatment to those who’d passed out from inhaling a high concentration of the gas. Although they were unconscious, they mercifully still had life left in them.

Oh, thank goodness, we managed to reach the hill, thought the soldiers. But Leonhardt, Weishardt, and Nierenberg’s worries were far from relieved.

It was very slow. The silver arrows peering over the bottom of the hill blackened. Slowly. Very slowly. From the silver arrows changing color, the men could see that the flood of gas was steadily climbing the hill and permeating the surrounding area.

Higher than this...?

There was nowhere else to escape to in this stratum. The stairs up to the next stratum were right next to the spout, closest to the deadly area.

Somewhere higher than this...?

Leonhardt looked up at the heavens as if to pray. Above him, there was no sky, only the gray ceiling of the Labyrinth illuminated by sunstones.

It was slow, but the color of the last silver arrow changed.

The unseen tentacles would soon reach their feet. They could no longer detect the stench from before.

Is this...the end...? Leonhardt resigned himself to his fate.

Pitter. Patter. Patter-patter-patter. From the ceiling, large globs of rain began to fall.

When he craned his neck upward, there wasn’t a cloud in sight. But heavy rain came down, soaking through the ceiling. Even though the upper stratum was

full of seawater, the rain didn't smell salty. Leonhardt didn't know what was going on. He only knew one thing.

We've been...saved...

This gas dissolved in water. They had come to set up the killer sweets between one of the downpours. They had come expecting rainfall.

In the midst of the storm, Leonhardt took a deep breath, soaked to the bone.

We survived, but... What's in the lower stratum...?

As rain fell in the Labyrinth, it washed away the stench of gas...and wiped away the smiles from the faces of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces.

CHAPTER 3

From Budding Branches





01



It had been three days since the Labyrinth Suppression Forces escaped the fifty-fifth labyrinth by the skin of their teeth. Three masculine figures were visiting the stratum, but there was no way to confirm that they were indeed men. Their identities could only be extrapolated from their height and gait, for their entire bodies were concealed by baggy, protective monster leather that made them appear to be hairless caterpillars. Each face was covered by a mask and goggles, making them essentially unidentifiable.

The poison gas hadn't reached the sea caverns of the fifty-fourth stratum. It was a calm and safe zone as usual. But one floor below it, ash coated the stairwell that had once led to the lush forest. Dried vegetation was strewn on the ground. But several hundred yards in the distance, the forest was green again, though its color was dulled by falling ash. Although they'd defeated the boss, the stratum had a regenerative power that was not possessed by most forests.

After descending down to the fifty-fifth stratum, the three people used a syringe to suck the surrounding air into a thin glass tube and a rubber pump to mix the air in a vial containing liquid. Then they checked the change in color of the contents in the glass tube and the condition of the liquid. The shortest among the three might have been the leader, taking the tube and vial and checking them, scribbling something in a notebook, then putting them away to bring back.

The trio repeated the same work in multiple locations, then approached the stairs to the gas leak leading to the fifty-sixth stratum.

When the boss had been defeated, the gas initially spewed out of the opening with force. Now it only appeared to rise hazily as steam. Even still, it was blisteringly hot and full of harmful elements. The gas alone was enough of a threat. Even if it was just water vapor, anything above four hundred degrees

Fahrenheit would be enough to cover your body in blisters.

One of the figures approached the spout, taking care to not touch the hot gas, and tossed in a rope tied to a bundle of minerals, vials, and pieces of metal. After a little while, he pulled it back up, moved away from the spout, and checked the change in color of the minerals and pieces of metal and the vials' contents. He must have analyzed the information from these results because he scribbled something in his notebook again, quickly stowed his tools, and indicated the stairs going up. "Let's go."

The three returned to the base of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces via the underground Aqueduct. After removing their masks and their bulky caterpillars of protective clothing, they proceeded to the council room where Leonhardt and others waited for them. In addition to Leonhardt, Weishardt, and Nierenberg, there were several aides with grim faces present.

Among the trio, one of them appeared to be a young scout of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, and the remaining two were the leader and a bespectacled man who looked to be an assistant, both of whom were invited for the purpose of this survey.

"Thanks for your hard work, Ghark. What's the situation?" asked Leonhardt.

"The gas's a typical volcanic gas. If ye wear just a mask, ye'll probably manage. The high temperature's more of a problem. It's out of the question if ye can't cool it down," answered the leader of the investigation, old man Ghark.

Ghark boasted the best investigative abilities in the Labyrinth City with his Material Appraisal skill, allowing him to harvest items in the Labyrinth by himself. When it came down to surveying the environment, no one could rival him, though investigating monsters was a different story. This ability was exactly why they had come to him with this request. The man appearing to be Ghark's assistant must have been an acquaintance. He was taller than average, and his build wasn't necessarily large. He wore glasses and a calm expression and appeared to be a scholar or a teacher. The assistant handed Ghark's note to Weishardt's aide.

This time, Weishardt asked a question as he looked at the note. "Let's say the masks make the poisonous gas harmless. Is it possible to breathe in the

oxygen?”

“I can’t say for sure until we can cool it down, but...I’m concerned about the composition of the gas. It didn’t explode when it opened. Based on that, ye can probably breathe. If that’s all yer after,” Ghark responded cryptically.

Nierenberg caught onto something. “Which means there’s oxygen there. No, you’re implying it’s being supplied. In other words, there has to be something—or someone—there that’s capable of surviving in that environment.”

“Yep. I imagine it’s one hell of a nuisance,” Ghark affirmed Nierenberg’s theory: The climate in each stratum in the Labyrinth had adjusted to the monsters inhabiting it—including poison gas and air.

Even from their limited information, they knew the fifty-sixth stratum was too hot for human activity, pumped full of poisonous volcanic gas, and abnormally high in pressure until the staircase had opened. What on earth could live there that needed oxygen...?

“In any case, let’s do what we can.” Leonhardt spoke up to break through the gloomy atmosphere. “Couldn’t we cool it by drawing seawater from the fifty-fourth stratum and its coastal caverns?”

“Let’s try to recreate the water bullets from the ruins of the Sea-Floating Pillar. I wonder if it’s possible to get a supply of water going.”

“And then the masks. Ghark, what kind do we need?”

“The lungs from a sub-dragon should be enough. A wyvern, to be exact. Better to have goggles, too. But I’m a wee bit worried that glass might not be as strong as we need it. Ye’re hunting wyverns regardless. If ye tan and stretch the wing membrane, ye can make good stuff from it.”

“Wyverns, huh? We’ll have to go into the Fell Forest. Ask the guild. This is a perfect opportunity for B-Rank members of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces to train, too. I’m sure they’ve grown tired of regular subjugation missions in the Fell Forest. Put together a joint operation. Nierenberg, continue to treat those with critical injuries,” instructed Leonhardt.

All present left their seats to carry out their respective responsibilities.

The fifty-sixth stratum remained a mystery. At this current state, they couldn't even enter it. Then again, they'd spend forever fighting against the King of Cursed Serpents. The fact that they had actionable steps for this mission made this stratum preferable.

"Well then, I'm gonna train this one and then go home. Call me when ye've cooled off the fifty-sixth stratum...er, *please*," Ghark added, realizing he should be more polite.

Ghark indicated the young scout from the Labyrinth Suppression Forces.

"I don't mind. I know you've retired, and I want to thank you for your help, Old Man Ghark," replied Leonhardt, using the old nickname in a voice thick with nostalgia.

"Now that's something I don't mind, General Leonhardt. A general's burdened with all sorts o' responsibilities, right? An' I'm yer subordinate, so give me all the orders ye like."

Ghark had once served Margrave Schutzenwald who was Leonhardt's grandfather. Leonhardt knew Ghark's personal history, but when he took up his new post in the Labyrinth City, Ghark had already retired and opened a medicinal herb shop. But whenever there was an emergency, the old man helped out for old times' sake. As he saw Ghark out of the council room, Leonhardt murmured a few words of thanks.



02



"I heard the Labyrinth Suppression Forces are back from the Fell Forest!"

"And they got a bigger haul than usual! Wanna check it out?"

A group of children called out to the young orphans who had come to deliver apriore fruit to Sunlight's Canopy, beckoning them to go see. After receiving a bag with their payment and cookies, the children rushed outside toward the main road, leaving the door open and letting the cold winter air in. It reminded

Mariela and her customers that it was cold outside as they lounged and warmed themselves in the sunlight from the ceiling windows or with magical heating tools.

“*Brrr*. Jeez, they could at least close the door. Is it already that time of the year for the Fell Forest expedition?” Lynx shuffled to the door, closing it shut. “Winter’s coming,” he muttered.

“Hey, Lynx. What’s the Fell Forest expedition?” Mariela asked.

The children were running as fast as their legs would carry them. This expedition had to be something interesting.

Mariela looked at Lynx with giddy anticipation.

“The Labyrinth Suppression Forces have come back from hunting in the Fell Forest,” he explained. “They parade along the main road, showing everyone in the City their spoils. You can see a ton of monster species, so it’s a fun event for those little urchins. And then after that, the Forces treat people to dishes cooked from the spoils. Everyone loves to chat about what they want to eat.”

Even the Fell Forest got low on food in the winter. It wasn’t an easy time of the year for the monsters, either—even those living deep in the forest came close to the Labyrinth City. Since some of the monsters were beyond the capabilities of the City Defense Squad at the outer wall, the Labyrinth Suppression Forces headed into the Fell Forest to cull the monsters before they could attack the City.

But monsters weren’t the only ones short on food. Even residents of the Labyrinth City were forced to eat less than usual with price hikes across the board. This was particularly true for young people who’d neglected to build up their stores for winter and slum residents who couldn’t afford these provisions in the first place. The Labyrinth Suppression Forces provided rations for those populations and cooked the edible monsters, offering food near the main road of the Labyrinth City. The opening day of these food kitchens was a winter wonderland with events cropping up in numerous places in the City featuring rows upon rows of food stalls.

“I wanna go see!”

“Seriously? But it’s so cold. Can’t it wait until the meal center is open this evening?”

“I wanna see the monsters!”

One would think monsters would be a familiar sight to someone who’d lived in the Fell Forest.

Lynx must have known that this would get her all excited and beg to go, because he stood up from his chair, despite his grumbling. After leaving the care of the store in Amber’s hands, he led Sieg and Mariela toward the main road.

Stretching from the southwestern gate to the Labyrinth, the main road was bustling with people, despite the winter cold. The Labyrinth City didn’t offer much in terms of entertainment. Even huddled up in the cold, the residents were having the time of their lives.

Around a hundred soldiers of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces were slowly parading along the road. Those marching at the front had to make up the army’s elite. Even from looks, the troop seemed strong, waving back to the cheering crowd and followed by ten yagus with fallen monsters piled on them.

The biggest game appeared to be a giant boar spanning three yards. It seemed very powerful with its rocky skin and splendid fangs as long as a person’s arm. It had been placed on a slipshod wagon pulled by two yagus. On the top of it rode a single soldier—he must have been the one to defeat it—posing with a spear, turning to the cheers of the crowd. The throngs of children imitated the soldier, hopping up and down in great delight. Of course, Mariela waved her hand madly in excitement, too.

Next in the procession were the yagus loaded with animals for consumption—from orcs, harpies, and other familiar monsters, to horned rabbits and all kinds of birds, to bats and rat monsters, to bears, foxes, deer, and more normal forest creatures. As if conscious of the fixed gaze of the crowd, the yagus raised their horns high and snorted roughly as they marched.

Next came the backup troops, presumably wearing the same black capes as the primary soldiers. They were carrying so much game on their backs that these capes were hidden as they smiled at the people’s cheers.

“Wowza! So many kinds of monsters. This is the first time I’ve seen that huge boar. What’s it called? Are they yummy?”

“That’s called a delicious pig,” Lynx responded, flippant. “And over there’s a tasty bird and delectable rabbits and bony birds. *Blech*, I think I see forest wolves. Mystery stew, again?”

While Mariela was bouncing with excitement like a little kid, Lynx didn’t seem to remember the names of any of the monsters except the forest wolves. But he did remember how they tasted. Maybe he just wasn’t interested in them.

“That thing is called a rock fang boar. It may be a four-legged monster, but it’s a lot stronger than an orc. Both the fur and the skin are as hard and tough as rocks, and the large fangs are its weapons. The black birds are...” Sieg industriously told Mariela about the monsters to supplement Lynx’s vague explanations. He had extensive knowledge of these animals, which made sense for an ex-hunter.

However, Mariela’s interest had been captured by another phrase.

“What’s mystery stew?!”

“You see how they’ve got a lot of game, including the gross ones? They’re going to toss in a bunch of small fry into a soup to hand out. And it’s distributed after the sun sets, so you won’t know what kind of meat’s in it unless you eat it. Forest wolf is tough and absolutely reeks, so getting it in your bowl is like pulling a losing ticket. With so much game, they don’t need to put it in, but since it gets everyone all riled up, they do it every time.”

“That sounds like fun!”

“Yeah. But it takes a long time to cook. When the stew’s done, the street vendors will be done setting up, so let’s go back for now and get ready for the main event.”

If Mariela was left alone, she was liable to follow the parade all the way to the front of the Labyrinth. With skill, Lynx managed to calm her and lead her back to Sunlight’s Canopy.

Mariela would get sick if she loitered around in this chilly weather for hours, and Lynx simply had no interest in standing out in the cold.

Well, I guess I did follow the parade when I was a little brat myself. Caught a cold every time.

As he watched the children pursuing the Labyrinth Suppression Forces parade carrying their game, Lynx recalled his childhood.

Lynx was not yet ten when Dick had made a name for himself in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces. Although they were both orphans, Dick was active on the front lines of the Forces with his spear, and other orphans, including Lynx, wanted to be just like him.

In his younger years, Lynx used to follow Dick and the rest of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, just as the kids had trailed after them earlier today. He always believed he'd someday be that strong and do great things.

Even now that he'd begun to understand his own aptitudes and limits, his feelings hadn't changed. He knew his shadowmaster abilities were suited for scouting. Even though he knew he fell far short of Captain Dick's fighting power, even though he realized he hadn't gotten much taller lately, he never lost sight of his aspiration to be like the captain.

The training at the Ahriman Springs hadn't been easy, but he felt he'd grown tremendously. With the knowledge that he could become stronger still, Lynx pictured a bright future for himself, just like he had as a child.

"Ffffh, ffffh. Oh, I got a winner. Mm! Yum!"

"That's great, Mariela. Crunch-crunch."

"Sieg, dude, meat isn't supposed to sound like that. You're not reacting, but I'm pretty sure you got that forest wolf meat."

"What?! Uh-oh, Sieg, did you lose?"

"...It's not good, but I can eat it."

At the start of their rationed meals, Mariela ate with relish, while Sieg had no luck on his side. That said, he ate with perfect stoicism, so she didn't grasp the depths of the darkness of his stew.

"Let me try a bite," she said, then fished a chunk of the forest wolf meat from Sieg's bowl. *"Blerg-urp.* What the heck?! It's tough and dry, and I just keep

chewing it and chewing it and it won't go away. And the gamy taste keeps getting worse."

"Ha-ha-ha! Nice reaction, Mariela." Lynx burst out laughing at Mariela's displeasure.

Mariela had discovered that the magic spell of *Let Me Try a Bite* would let her pick the weird pieces of meat from her friends' dishes, giving her the excuse to try all the skewers and desserts at the food stalls to cleanse her palate. As they mingled with the other City residents who'd gathered on the main road for winter entertainment, the three thoroughly enjoyed their rationed food.

The food distribution continued from evening until the time the children fell asleep. The place had bustled with children and families around sunset, but as it grew late, the stalls began to set out alcohol so the adults could party.

Even though the bite of winter had started to abate, the nights were still cold. Under the clear, starry sky and the abnormal number of lights from the stalls, adults gathered with bottles in their hands next to magical tools to warm themselves. It was an extraordinary sight to the children. Even as they rubbed their sleepy eyes, they tried to wander close to the crowd as their parents or elders pulled them by the hand and hurried along the road home.

Mariela and Lynx shared this sentiment, but Mariela had to make potions after this, and Lynx had to carry them. So Lynx parted from Mariela and Sieg, returning to the Black Iron Freight Corps' base for the time being.

When it grew very late, Lynx joined up with Lieutenant Malraux, traveled through the underground Aqueduct, accepted the potions in the cellar of Sunlight's Canopy, and carried them to the Labyrinth Suppression Forces' base.

With this, his work was done. Malraux returned to his own home, and Lynx returned to the base. Now that the lights from the feast in the Labyrinth City had all been extinguished, it seemed even quieter than usual, making it lonelier.

The Black Iron Freight Corps' base had been built in an unsafe part of the City near the slums, in a building that used to be a cheap inn for new adventurers. Since it had originally been built as an inn, each room was small, though they were many. Although the slaves shared a room, Lynx and the others had each been allotted their own. The stable and the place to store carriages were used

as a raptor pen and a storehouse. All in all, it was a very convenient property for the Corps.

He'd already had dinner today, meaning he didn't stop by the kitchen to eat. Lynx headed for the communal bath to wash off his sweat. Captain Dick and the rest of the transportation group hadn't returned yet, making Lynx and Jay the only people in the base.

He couldn't have a conversation with the voiceless Jay, so Lynx returned to his own room. The base of the Black Iron Freight Corps was so hushed that the hustle and bustle from earlier in the night honestly could have happened in some distant world.

What an empty room, Lynx thought as he looked around.

This was the first time he'd had a room to himself. As a child, he'd lived in an orphanage with other people. When he'd joined the Black Iron Freight Corps, he'd taken naps in the armored carriages or temporarily stayed at inns in the City.

Although the room was small, there had been two beds in it back when the building was a cheap hotel. Other than his bed, the space was large enough for a desk and shelves. But the only other thing in Lynx's room was a small bookshelf—no desk or chair.

As far as his personal effects, he had a few changes of clothes and miscellaneous items that all fit into a single box—with the exception of his equipment. That was about as much as a temporary residence inn like the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion would let him bring in.

Even considering those circumstances, Lynx's room was almost dreary.

He didn't even have any magical tools for lighting. Lynx could perceive the state of his room from the faint light of the stars shining in from the small window, which might have been a side effect of his shadowmaster skills.

At times, he didn't think it was inconvenient, and at times, he had little interest in his room other than to sleep. Just as he had the vague belief that he could still become stronger, he thought about the potential for this room—if he only had the inclination to change it. But he hadn't bought anything extra for it

yet in particular.

I had fun today. Lynx lay on his bed and thought back on the day.

He'd eaten and laughed with Mariela and Sieg, and he enjoyed himself a lot more than usual. This must have been why he'd thought the room looked very empty, when he hardly paid attention to it most days.

Come to think of it...

Lynx produced a candle from his pocket. Mariela had given it to him today, and it was no ordinary stick of wax.

This one was mixed with some extract from bromominthra. Monster repellent.

"It's a scented candle to use against monsters," she had told him.

He thought scented candles were therapeutic for the soul. But if monsters found it pungent, could it still technically count as aromatherapy?

"Monsters will have a hard time coming near it, so use it when you need a light in the Fell Forest," she'd said as she handed it to him. A candle's original purpose was to light up dark places, though, not ward off monsters. With the thought of letting it perform its original job, Lynx placed the candle on a plate on top of the shelf and lit it.

Surprisingly bright, Lynx thought as he gazed at the flickering flame.

The warm, orange flame flickered in a clumsy dance, which was just one of the ways it reminded him of Mariela.

As soon as he'd lit this candle, the room felt warmer, although there was no way a small flame could change the temperature of a room by itself. Both the shelf and the rough, angular bed that looked like it was built from broken pieces of wood appeared soft in the light of the flame.

Huh, that's pretty nice.

If he put more of his own things in his room, in his own space, maybe his day-to-day life would be more fun.

If he had someone who could shed light on him, even as he pursued his vague

goal of becoming as strong as the captain, maybe his days would be brighter.

Oh, I see. I guess I...



The warm light of the candle brought forth images of a life with Mariela to Lynx's mind—days filled with laughter. At that moment, he understood the feelings waxing in his heart.

But there was something he didn't realize.

The flame of the candle was so small and weak that it didn't illuminate the entire room. Next to the soft light spilling across the area around him, the rest of the space was shrouded in shadow.

A single candle wasn't nearly enough to illuminate a distant place—and the distant future that Lynx wished for.

The light of just one candle attracted insects and was easily extinguished by a draft before settling into darkness. The young Lynx hadn't yet realized it would take many, many candles to drive away the darkness.



03



"Hey, Sieg! Let's go hunt wyverns."

Lynx was so relaxed, it sounded like an invitation to play.

"Wyverns, huh...?"

That was the monster that had crushed his right eye, Mariela remembered. Words caught in her throat, and she glanced over in Sieg's direction.

Sieg wore a blank expression, at a loss for a reply.

It had been almost half a year since Mariela and Sieg had started living together. During that time, she'd heard how Sieg lost his eye and the sequence of events leading to his fall into slavery.

Whether or not he noticed the silence falling over the pair, Lynx continued. "Hey, they awarded you B Rank for completing the request to beat the needle apes, right? You've come this far; let's aim for A Rank."

“But I need to protect Mariela... Besides, becoming an A-Rank seems...,” Sieg said evasively.

It was clear the purpose of stationing Nierenberg and Labyrinth Suppression Forces soldiers at Sunlight’s Canopy under the guise of medical examinations was to protect Mariela. It was as close as they came to saying that Sieg alone wasn’t fit to be her escort. Nierenberg’s intensive training had continued every morning even after Sieg returned from the Ahriman Springs, and Sieg had continued to be going against the grain almost every day. He repeatedly asked for training, even as he confronted his own lack of talent, because he wanted to keep being Mariela’s escort.

Mariela was kind. Even if Sieg was inadequate, she would probably let him stay with her and give him a stable life. But for Sieg, that just wasn’t enough. He wanted to be recognized as Mariela’s escort through his own capabilities. He didn’t want to give this role to anyone else.

If only I had my Spirit Eye.

Every time he was reminded of his own powerlessness, he regretted losing his Spirit Eye. If he’d just had his Spirit Eye, its divine protection would have brought A Rank within reach for him.

After he returned from the Ahriman Springs, he’d purchased a bow and arrows for practice and tried to use them just once.

But he’d been haunted by that experience ever since. He hadn’t even come close to hitting the target. In fact, he didn’t even know how he should aim. He’d worked with this weapon since childhood. Muscle memory should have kicked in. But it was as if he was handling it for the first time. It was the same uncomfortable feeling as having a word at the tip of your tongue. He’d managed to fire an arrow that arced far away from the target, landing in a thicket in the medicinal herb garden. He was so clumsy that if his old self with the Spirit Eye could see him now, old Sieg would have told him, “You have no talent. Just give up.” So Sieg had placed the bow and arrows away on a shelf in his room.

He hadn’t drawn a bow in years, and even his dominant eye had changed. Of course he would feel out of place. He wouldn’t be able to regain his intuition

with just a single shot. He'd slung bows ever since he was a child. There was no doubt he would remember the archery stance, etched into his body—if he'd chosen to practice over and over. But Sieg couldn't even come to terms with this obvious fact. He believed the loss of his Spirit Eye was the source of everything. He hadn't realized he was looking for an excuse for his own weakness in his past.

I'm weak without the Spirit Eye. I'm not even a match for Lynx, who's far younger than me. I want to become strong. But I couldn't handle a wyvern even back then. For me, becoming an A-Rank seems..., thought Sieg, face clouding over.

But before Sieg could turn him down, Lynx continued.

"I heard from Haage that if you can reach A Rank in the Labyrinth City, you can receive a pardon to free you from slavery."

"Really?! That's great, Sieg!" Mariela exclaimed after a moment of silence. Sieg opened his one eye wide and intently stared first at Lynx, then Mariela.

"That said, it requires the master's permission and a recommendation from an A-Rank. On top of that, you also gotta be reviewed and stuff before you can get promoted. Plus, even after you're released, you gotta register either in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces or as an adventurer exclusive to the Labyrinth City for ten years *and* pay half your earnings to your former master. Just a bunch of rules. It's honestly a pain in the ass. For some reason, Haage said he'd recommend you, and since the captain is A Rank, you could ask him, too. Give it a shot."

"Is this true...?" Sieg finally asked.

"It is," replied Ghark, who'd been quietly sitting in his usual seat in Sunlight's Canopy drinking tea. "As far as the Labyrinth City's concerned, possessin' power worthy of an A-Rank is worth a pardon. Of course, they can't afford to release murderers, which is why there's a review. But in yer case, there shouldn't be a problem."

"Mr. Ghark, are there a lot of A-Rank people who got released?" asked Mariela.

Ghark shook his head slightly. “Nope. To my knowledge, there’s only been one. It’s not such an easy thing gettin’ to A Rank. Rare that ye’ll find those with the ability, and if ye do, their masters don’t want to let ’em go. Even if they would get half the slave’s earnin’s fer ten years, some masters can’t abide the idea of their slaves happy,” Ghark spat out.

What had he seen? But he said no more on that subject and gazed fixedly at Sieg.

“Listen, sonny. Chances don’t just come along any old time.”

After leaving these words with a bewildered Sieg, Ghark returned to his own shop.

“Sieg, I’ll be rooting for you! I know you can do it!” Mariela cheered.

With Ghark’s warning and Mariela’s encouragement, Sieg stared at her for a little while. “I’ll try it.”

“You heard the guy. Well, let’s hurry to the Adventurers Guild to get you registered!” Lynx urged, striking while the iron was hot, and the two left Sunlight’s Canopy.

“See ya later!” Mariela called out, sending them off with a smile and wave. But the smile immediately slipped off her face.

After they were gone, she gazed silently at Sunlight’s Canopy’s door. *I’m happy Sieg has a chance to be free, but...*

Mariela felt restless at the hazy feeling in her heart. She absentmindedly recalled the dull hours she’d spent alone in Sunlight’s Canopy while Sieg and Lynx were at the Ahriman Springs.

When he’s free, would he still come back to live here?

Mariela couldn’t put that thought into words—because she was unaware of its true character.

The pair had left through the door to Sunlight’s Canopy, reminding Mariela of the door to her little house in the Fell Forest after her master had left.





After finishing his application for the wyvern hunt at the Adventurers Guild, Sieg parted ways with Lynx and made his way to Ghark's Herbal Supplies. He was curious about what the old man had said before.

Upon seeing Sieg, Ghark was ready to talk.

"Ye want to hear the tale of the man who was freed from slavery, right?" He led him to the back of the shop where he began to weave his tale.

"In the imperial capital, orphans from the slums usually become thieves—if they ever get the chance, that is."

Rather, it was rare for someone to survive to an age where they could become a thief. From the time these orphans were born, they hadn't been granted the basic necessities for a decent life.

"Well, it was the same old pattern until he was caught and sent to the Labyrinth City as a penal laborer. Even then, he was a lucky bastard. The Margrave Schutzenwald of the time was a character, givin' decent work to even penal laborers with useful skills."

Apparently, that "lucky bastard" had the Appraisal skill. Maybe it was because he'd rooted through the garbage for things he could eat or sell ever since he was old enough; in fact, he'd become a thief because someone offered a price for his skills. The margrave at the time authorized the man to study with a focus on that skill, and he was assigned to the Labyrinth Suppression Forces as a scout.

"He'd scavenged high and low to find food and valuables to line his pockets. Comes as no surprise that he found a lone woman in the Labyrinth, too."

She'd needed help, but not because monsters were attacking her. Although all the monsters in that stratum had been defeated by her powerful lightning magic, a falling pillar happened to pin her down, and she was struggling under it. It was a pretty dumb story.

“She wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, if ye know what I mean, but she had an absurd amount’a firepower. Dunno what she was thinkin’, but afterward, she said she’d fallen in love with the slave who saved her and went all the way to the Labyrinth Suppression Forces to enlist.”

The Forces couldn’t turn down a woman who was a high-ranking adventurer and possessed this powerful protection. Furthermore, to grant her request, the man was transferred to the same squad as her to provide support.

“Anyhoo, she was strong, but she solved everythin’ by bulldozin’ through it with magic. Even if the poor bastard on her team had nine lives, they wouldn’t’ve been enough. If he took his eyes off her fer a moment, this woman—Emeralda, she called herself—would be caught in some trap and surrounded by monsters. She’d probably die if that happened, so the man started to rack his brain fer ideas.”

Emeralda had an extremely eccentric personality, but she listened honestly to what the man had to say. In fact, she could often be found giggling. She’d throw herself in a swarm of monsters if she had the chance, and he had to provide backup with surveys and tactics. Every time they barely managed to escape death, they would burst into laughter. It was said the man who skillfully supported Emeralda and achieved military gains was allowed to act more freely than others of his social position because of his relationship with her. Perhaps the margrave knew they loved each other.

“Every day was a good time in its own way. But the man was a slave, and there was no reason fer them to be with each other, y’know. So when he heard they’d conceived a child, he panicked.”

The man had been given responsibilities in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces and received a small allowance as compensation, but it was by no means enough to support a family. And above all else, with his history as a penal laborer, he couldn’t reveal himself as the child’s father.

“I’m the one who’s gonna give birth and breastfeed. There’s nothing for you to worry about,” Emeralda had said, chuckling.

“But that wasn’t the case, o’ course,” Ghark said, suddenly fixing his eyes on Sieg.

His tone made the assertion sound more like a question.

Many people in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces had families. Of course, since it was dangerous work, there were also many who'd departed this world and left families behind. Around that time, an orphanage had been established in the Labyrinth City to raise children with deceased parents. But he was still alive. And yet, he was unable to provide for the woman who loved him and their child on the way. He couldn't have felt more pathetic than that.

He'd looked on his past, wondering what he could have done different to live an honest life. But there was nothing he could do about it now. Considering his background, the fact he was working for the Labyrinth Suppression Forces as a penal laborer was preferable. Even though he knew he'd made wrong choices in the past, he couldn't turn back time and do things over. The future was the only thing that could change. All he could do was try as hard as he could to make it happen.

Even if he couldn't change his social position, he could probably change his own circumstances from here on out.

With this on his mind, the man worked harder than he ever had before. He used his ingenuity to gain knowledge, appraise things, and make progress in the Labyrinth. When he heard that he could be released from slavery by becoming an A-Rank, he felt grateful to fate for giving him another chance at life.

Eventually, he gained his freedom after the birth of his child. Raising the child had been a busy but happy time, until Emeralda was poisoned by a monster and abruptly passed away. He hadn't been able to do anything to save her, but Emeralda laughed, leaving him with "We had a good run."

"And that's the reason for the herb shop?" Sieg asked, piecing together the rest. Ghark had begun running a shop dealing in medicinal herbs because he'd lost his wife, Emeralda, to monster poison.

How did he figure out the man in the story was Ghark himself? Maybe it was when the old man had said "there's only been one" in Sunlight's Canopy.

Ghark evaded Sieg's question. "It's a hobby fer a retired old man. Did ye know? When ye tell someone 'I appreciate it,' it means ye know how much what they gave ye was worth. I'm sure ye've experienced those kinda feelings

yourself.”

This exception to free slaves might be a formality—a front—meant to motivate them. With more talent in a slave, the master would become more reluctant to let them go. This made the last part of the rule—requiring the master’s permission—the most difficult prerequisite of them all.

Just as Ghark had said with scorn in Sunlight’s Canopy, there were probably many people who had the power of an A-Rank but had never been released. Ghark may only have been released because of the adventurer Emeralda.

In other words, the road to becoming an A-Rank adventurer provided to Sieg was something to be grateful for and a favor for him to repay.

But after hearing the story, Sieg felt that Ghark wasn’t trying to really talk about the “value” of the chance to be released, but the “grateful” frame of mind toward the present.

Sieg’s heart had been searching for a reason for his weakness, and Ghark had struck right to the core of it: *“That wasn’t the case.”*



05



Wyverns lived on a steep, rocky mountain south of the Labyrinth City.

The mountain range towered above the Labyrinth City from the north to the far east, walling it in. On the south side of the City, it met the Fell Forest.

Where they touched, the mountain range ended abruptly as though it’d been sliced through. The terrain hosted mountainous clusters of boulders, which made it impossible for vegetation to grow. Among the towering rocks, the groundwater that ran through the Labyrinth City had joined to make one big stream that gushed with rolling rapids. This river weaving through the peaks and valleys prevented monsters from the Fell Forest from surging into the mountain range.

This section of the Fell Forest near the complicated, rugged terrain was

populated by nests of monster herds, including orcs and goblins. And the mid- and large-size monsters that these monsters preyed upon. Among the steep cliffs, harpies made their nests.

Wyverns could prey on all these monsters. They had inhabited this cornucopia from ancient times, preferring to nest on the cliffs.

Their territory was relatively close to the Labyrinth City, about three hours away by yagu. Two centuries ago, it had been a popular hunting ground. A road had even been developed.

But then the monster-warding potions completely disappeared from the market. These hunting grounds had a high probability of encountering goblins and other small fry—more than wyverns—making them inefficient places to hunt. With less foot traffic, the road had been covered by the overgrown forest.

A group of adventurers trudged toward wyvern territory, clearing the old road. The cold had started to abate, and there was no snow left in the Fell Forest. The days were growing longer, too, so if they set out for the wyverns' territory early in the morning, they would have plenty of time to hunt even if they needed to return to the Labyrinth City by sunset.

The Adventurers Guild had handed down a request that was limited to B-Rank adventurers and promised to add points toward a promotion to the next rank based on the number of defeated monsters. The bounty and sale price of wyverns were reasonable, but for this request, they could trade in their spoils on site. Since they didn't have to carry their haul themselves, they could stay at the hunting ground for a long time and focus on defeating monsters. This was more efficient than going into the Labyrinth. On top of all that, they were sprinkled with a little monster-warding potion to shoo away the small fry on their way to wyvern territory by the contact person of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces stationed at the City's southern gate. In all honesty, there was no better deal.

Because there was a limit of one hundred wyvern trade-ins, B-Rank adventurers aiming for A Rank rushed to be first.

"Wait, why am I here...?"

"A-Rankers get all the girls, Ed."

“They’ll fall head over heels for you, Edgan!”

“Oh really?”

It was a lie. Obviously.

Just look at the A-Rank adventurers in their lives: Dick and Haage.

Well, Haage *was* a married man popular among the needle apes, and Dick’s wife was *the* Amber. Although if they hadn’t been childhood friends, it was questionable whether the latter couple would have happened. Regardless, both men were married, bringing lunches made by their loving wives to work. You could probably say those men were popular compared to Edgan.

Lynx and Sieg had dragged the good-time Charlie of the Black Iron Freight Corps, Edgan, along with them to participate as a trio. Incidentally, the Black Iron Freight Corps had been asked to transport the wyverns by the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, and they were stationed in the Labyrinth City.

The trees growing in the road to wyvern territory had been hurriedly chopped down to clear the road somewhat, but the stumps hadn’t been removed and the ground hadn’t been compacted, making it impossible for armored carriages to get to the destination. Collected wyvern materials were dismantled on the spot, loaded onto raptors or yagus, and transported to the Labyrinth City with an escort to protect against monsters from the Fell Forest.

Employees had been dispatched from the Adventurers Guild and the wholesale market to dissect the monsters, and the transportation was undertaken by the Labyrinth Suppression Forces or private transportation groups like the Black Iron Freight Corps. If you were carrying a load, normally wolf-type monsters would close in on you in droves for a delicious meal, but thanks to the monster-warding potions, they didn’t even dare to make their approach. Every once in a while, an A-or B-Rank monster came upon their path, which was immediately defeated. It was an easy road.

From the Black Iron Freight Corps, the animal trainer Yuric drove the raptors and yagus, and Dick served as an escort. They made two round trips per day. The other members were enjoying the long vacation of their dreams.

“Ooh! Look there! And there and there and there!”

Wyverns had already started soaring over them when they arrived at the mountains. Even from a distance, they could see the creatures. In fact, one of the wyverns had taken notice of the trio and swooped down on them.

These creatures were lizards classified as sub-dragons with two legs, a pair of wings, and a long tail. The schools of thought differed in their opinions on the differences between dragon species and sub-dragon species, but the presence or absence of magic was one of the classification methods that they all agreed on. For example, in the case of winged dragon species, the wings often didn't counterbalance body weight. Scholars believed these species flew with magic, while in contrast, wyverns and other sub-dragons used their wings to fly.

Excluding their wings and tail, their bodies were longer than horses, but their wingspan was wide, and their long tails added to the impression of size. Despite that, they weighed less than horses, and their tails were spiked with a poisonous barb to supplement their low attack power.

Other than their wings, they were lizard-like. Their taloned wings had perhaps evolved from forelegs, gripping onto objects with the dexterity of hands. Their faces were reptilian, but their mouths were as sharp as beaks, and opening them revealed a row of fangs.

Their large eyes with vertical-slit pupils zeroed in on Sieg's group. For two centuries, not a single human would have paid a visit to this place. Did the creature think they were goblins or ogres? Either way, it saw them as food.

"Kra-ka-ka-ka-ka!"

The wyvern must have thought Sieg's group would be easy prey because they didn't run when they saw it. The creature made a sound reminiscent of a bird and nose-dived toward the group.

"Sieg, you're first. Go get your revenge," Lynx urged.

Sieg took several steps forward.

"If you stay calm, it'll be no problem. And we'll help out if anything happens!" added Edgan with his easygoing candor.

Sieg unsheathed his mythril sword.

Nothing would get between Sieg and the wyvern.

Has it already been... six years...?

The looming wyvern made Sieg recall the day he lost his Spirit Eye.

Six years ago, I was able to achieve B Rank thanks to the divine protection of the Spirit Eye, Siegmund thought.

Back then, whenever he loosed an arrow, he would hit a monster in its weak point. When he'd gone to the forest to hunt wyverns with his hunting party, he'd expected an easy step up from the low-grade monsters cloaked in their soft hides.

They had settled on a hunting zone in the forest where it was difficult to fly over, far from the wyverns' habitat. With difficulty, their scout led just one wyvern to this advantageous terrain, but the shield knight had no ability to draw its attention like he was supposed to. Well, the other party members weren't much different. The wyvern had gotten to them, and they ran around trying to escape.

In the midst of the chaos, the wyvern had decided Siegmund was its prey, swooping down on him. And Siegmund didn't have the ability to defeat it alone at the time.

Thud-thud-thud. His heart hammered against his chest. Siegmund recalled the pain as his vision was blotted out by the red of his own blood that day.

There was nothing between Sieg and the wyvern to intercept the creature's attack. The wyvern nose-dived from high above, coming just about ten feet away. It was probably going to strike him with its poisonous barb before making a sharp turn back toward the sky. He could tell from the high position of the tail and the contraction of the wing muscles preparing for a turn.

I can see it...

Back then, he had allowed the wyvern to get close, letting his tail drive him away and poison him. Now he could detect the slight shifts in its tail and wings, letting him guess their trajectory. With only a slight movement, he dodged the poisonous tail that swung at him and cut it off with his mythril sword.

Back then, I didn't even know I could infuse my weapon with magical power...

He'd only ever felled monsters with ordinary iron arrows. Because that was the only kind of hunting that he'd known, he'd never even thought to sufficiently train his body. When he thought about it now, he hadn't even known how to use his other muscles. The wyvern's hide had repelled his arrows, and he had no hope of wounding it, but his mythril sword with magical power in his hands now severed the wyvern's tail as if it were cutting through rope.

"Kra-ka!" Shrieking in pain and rage, the wyvern immediately corrected its balance, thrown off by the loss of its tail, and flapped its wings to fly again.

"Wind Edge."

That was when Sieg's blade of wind cut through its wing membrane. Now that it'd lost its exit, the wyvern's wings beat the air in vain as it collapsed to the ground.

"Kra-ka-ka-ka-ka!" it screamed in rage, standing up on its two hind legs and running at him like a raptor. Though their habitats were on cliffs and craters, the muscles on their legs were developed enough to give them the speed of raptors. The talons on its wings grabbed at Sieg's head, and it bared its fangs to bite the nape of his neck.

Just like back then...

He was remembering the time when the wyvern's talons caught the right side of his head and crushed his Spirit Eye, tearing up his head and leaving a deep scar on his face. When the wyvern had opened its mouth wide to bite down on the unprotected left side of his nape, the arrow he'd nocked just happened to pierce its mouth into its brain. It was only by simple chance he'd been able to defeat the creature.

The talons extended toward him just like the past wyvern's. Sieg caught the talons with his mythril sword and used all his strength to thrust them aside. Back then, it was Sieg who had been pushed around by the wyvern, but now he was able to turn back the talons on its wings. He drove his sword straight forward into the wyvern's open mouth, all the way to the back of its head and into its skull, then lopped off its head. With a thud, the wyvern collapsed to the

ground.

That was anticlimactic...

It hadn't even been a struggle. It was almost as though he'd watched someone else felling the wyvern with ease...even though he'd doubted he could even defeat one when he heard the conversation about wyvern hunting.

He raised the mythril sword and gazed at his face reflected in the blade.

Who is this?

On that day six years ago, Siegmund had been intoxicated by the power of the Spirit Eye and believed it to be his own strength.

The man reflected in the sword didn't have a Spirit Eye. The one with the Spirit Eye had been easily routed by a wyvern. Now this one-eyed man had trained day after day, crawling along the bare earth and facing his own weakness—his lack of strength to protect his master.

Who is this?

The man with the Spirit Eye had looked at himself in the mirror every morning, thinking he was hot stuff for his good looks and the women he attracted. The face that lingered in his memory was repulsive to him, oozing an intolerable haughtiness. After he lost the Spirit Eye and fell into slavery, he hadn't even had the confidence to really look at his reflection in a body of water. He hadn't hesitated to rub his forehead on the ground for scraps of food—his expression was vacant and ugly. And he hadn't even felt indifferent about it.

Now reflected in the blade was a man unlike anything Sieg remembered. After he came to the Labyrinth City, he stopped staring in mirrors for any purpose other than to fix his personal appearance—because he had someone he *wanted* to look at, someone he couldn't take his eyes off.

That someone faced a mirror every morning, combing her hair and nodding in satisfaction. You could almost hear her think, *Perfect*, as her head bobbed. Where she couldn't see, her bedhead remained perfectly intact.

That someone didn't avert her eyes from the festering scars of a slave, when

he was so dirty that no one should associate with him. Rather, she had used her own hands to heal him and straighten his foul hair. It was only when she'd trimmed his hair too short that she averted her eyes in embarrassment.

That someone boasted incredible magical reserves, nonchalantly whipping up a hundred high-grade potions every day. And yet, she appeared as though she could trip on thin air.

He had gazed at his master with such intensity that his own face had become unfamiliar to him.

The man reflected in the blade had nothing that even came close to resembling a Spirit Eye.

However, Siegmund felt that man in the blade could fulfill the hopes and hidden wishes locked away in his heart.

This... This is...me. Siegmund gripped his mythril sword tightly.

Mariela had poured half of her own fortune into this sword for him right after he came to the Labyrinth City. At the time, she hadn't yet sufficiently planned out how she was going to make a living. She must have worried that Sieg would be in trouble if anything happened to her, bestowing him with this extravagant sword, which Sieg considered an unequaled, priceless treasure. This sword had adapted to Sieg's magic, and its sharpness increased with the clarity of magic infused into it.



The man reflected in the blade was worthy of this sword. Or he most certainly would be, even if he wasn't quite there yet. Siegmund knew this as fact.

"Hey, Mr. Siegmund! Hellooo? Knock-knock! Is anyone home?" called out Lynx.

"Lynx, let him bask in it a little longer."

Sieg stood stock still as he gazed at his sword. Edgan sat on a nearby rock in complete observation mode, offering live coverage of the transpiring events, complete with titles: "Chapter One: Sieg's Fight for Revenge. Chapter Two: An Emotional Victory."

"Ah, sorry. I was lost in thought."

Lynx's voice brought Sieg back to his senses, and he turned in the pair's direction.

"No worries. Hey, you beat the wyvern, right? We probably have a chance at A Rank, too," said Lynx.

"That's right. After we take this one to the transportation group, let's keep knocking them down."

Sieg sheathed his sword and walked back toward the other two. He seemed refreshed, as though all his worries had been dispelled. More than that, he emanated a strong determination to strive for his goal and move forward.

"Huh. You look like a whole new person. I'm glad. Hey, Sieg, I have something I wanna tell you," Lynx called over to him as he approached.

Sieg had adopted a look of peace, feeling like nothing could disrupt it. "Hmm? What is it?" he asked, urging Lynx to go on.

"When I get bumped up to A Rank, I'm gonna tell Mariela how I feel."

Siegmund instantly stiffened, his calmness completely dissolved.

"Whoa. Is this the start of 'Chapter Three: A Formidable Foe'?" Edgan narrated.

Siegmund was the only one frozen in place. He couldn't even feel the blast of winter air blowing by.

“Nah. I think ‘Head over Heels’ is better, right?” Lynx corrected before shifting his attention to the inner part of the forest as if following the path of the wind.

He could tell buds were beginning to grow on the trees swaying in the wind, although they were still tightly closed. On a closer look, sprouts were breaking through the undergrowth at his feet. Straining his ears, he could hear the breathing of forest animals waking up from hibernation mingled with the wind tousling the vegetation.

Spring would shortly arrive in the Labyrinth City.



06



The wyverns were only easy to hunt on the first day, falling for every trick in the book.

They had just seen humans for the first time and swooped down on them, thinking they were easy prey like goblins or orcs. As the adventurers felled their comrades one after another, however, the creatures must have come to understand that they were powerful enemies. Rather than launching an attack, the wyverns started to gaze at the humans from on top of the rocky mountains.

Given the situation, the adventurers would be forced to scale the mountains to defeat them, so they needed to come up with a way to lure the wyverns down. People wearing orc skins and even those who painted their faces green to appear as goblins tested their luck. This battle of wits between the adventurers and the wyverns continued for about a week until the Labyrinth Suppression Forces’ trade-in limit of one hundred was reached.

During that time, Sieg’s group continued their days of setting out from the Labyrinth City every morning before dawn and returning to Sunlight’s Canopy at dinnertime. Although Lynx had been the one to spring an unlikely surprise on Sieg—which could be taken as a declaration of war—he neither touched on the subject again nor changed his usual behavior. He saw Sieg and Mariela at the same frequency as always, returning to Sunlight’s Canopy with Sieg and Edgan.

“We’re back!” he would announce before eating dinner and returning home.

Mariela would make those dinners with Sherry and Amber. The father and daughter of the Nierenberg family fell into the habit of eating before going home for the night. As expected of newlyweds, Amber ate dinner with Captain Dick in her new home, except she placed the food from Mariela’s in a container and took it with her. After all, she had a hand in making it, too. It wasn’t *not* her cooking.

“You see, the owner of the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion always fed me, so this helps me out a bunch,” Amber had said, all cheery—never once recognizing that she was essentially cutting corners.

With sauce on her cheek, Mariela looked so happy to have a chatty dinner surrounded by people. Sieg couldn’t imagine the day when he wouldn’t be able to sit next to her anymore.

The Black Iron Freight Corps had taken the request to transport the wyverns, but no armored carriages saw any action. Since raptors and rented yagus were used to carry loads, only Yuric and Dick made those round trips. Apart from Malraux, who was discussing future support with the top brass of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, Donnino, Grandel, Franz, and the three slaves were relaxing at their base in the Labyrinth City.

“Hey, Nick, spanner,” Donnino spoke simply without using a single verb.

The slave named Nick passed off a spanner to Donnino, who had crawled under an armored carriage to work on upgrading the wheels. When the Black Iron Freight Corps first bought the slaves, they’d nervously stuck together most of the time, but the slaves had gotten completely used to the Corps by now. Each one’s personality and special skills had begun to show.

Nick seemed to have an interest in the armored carriages, because when Donnino messed around with them, he came over and offered to help.

He was originally a lowly thief, as were the other slaves. He had sticky fingers and a fuzzy boundary between good and evil. Apparently, he had wanted to carry things he could use as weapons, as Nick constantly nicked tools for maintaining the armored carriages and shoved them into his pockets. Of course, Donnino noticed his antics. Since the slave wanted to carry tools so much,

Donnino bought an artisan's tool belt for him to carry them all. Nick was thrilled, feeling stronger just by having so many iron tools—pseudo-weapons—and Donnino, too, was delighted to have a walking toolbox.

Although Nick had been granted a great number of tools to carry, he was absolutely obedient not only to Donnino but all the other members of the Black Iron Freight Corps. It was known that he would never use the tools to attack them.

And that reason was extremely simple.

It went back to the time he'd gotten down from a carriage to rest in the Fell Forest. A goblin happened to attack him, and Nick retaliated with his hidden spanner. The goblin snatched it from him and turned the tables.

"Don't you treat my tools poorly!" boomed Donnino.

His fist of rage defeated the goblin who was ready to pounce with the spanner. That's right. The spanner lost the battle against Donnino's bare fist and was bent out of shape. Now who was it that was treating tools poorly? More importantly, Nick swore obedience from the bottom of his small knavish heart in the face of Donnino's—er, the *Black Iron Freight Corps'* power.

Nick jangled around with tools swinging from his body like an adventurer's weapons, perhaps reveling in being taken under the wing of a powerful man. Nick stuck close to Donnino and helped with the maintenance of the iron carriages.

When the slave stooped under the weight of the heavy tools, he looked especially weak, but Nick wasn't aware of this.

Another slave called Newie worked hard making preserved foods in the base's kitchen.

The Black Iron Freight Corps spent the majority of the month on the move. They couldn't make a leisurely trip through the Fell Forest, but during their journey to the imperial capital, they set up camp, making and eating their meals. Naturally, that was a slave's job. Among them, Newie was known as the best cook, and ever since this had been discovered, he'd been assigned the role: not only when they made camp, but also at the base, whipping up meals and

preserved foods.

Almost all the members of the Black Iron Freight Corps dined out for every meal while they were in the City, but after Newie started cooking, more people began to have breakfast and lunch at the base.

Newie just couldn't shake the same habit as Nick. His sticky fingers were irreparable, snatching up food while he was cooking. He could have been gluttonous—vying to eat more than others—or just insatiable. He deliberately thickly peeled the skin from vegetables, washing and drying them to fry in oil—making them into snacks to eat in secret. Naturally, the members of the Black Iron Freight Corps knew about this, but the body was an asset in this line of work, and no one found fault with him eating his fill, so they let him do as he wished.

“Wouldn't it be better to have seconds than sneaking bites of half-cooked veggies?” Yuric had said, echoing a common sentiment, but the healer Franz was the one to correctly guess Newie's feelings: “Stealing food lets him taste a sense of accomplishment, too.”

Since there was no real harm in it and the person in question was satisfied, everyone pretended not to notice.

But his original recipes were starting to develop in all the wrong places. Newie didn't even know the fundamentals of cooking—including preparing soup stock in advance.

The others, including the shield knight Grandel, were impressed with Newie's fixation on food, and they bought a variety of seasonings for him.

“Newie, c'mere,” Grandel called to the slave, who rushed over in a fluster. In his hands were a washed apron and a cooking knife, which he held on to as if they were treasures. Both were items that Grandel had bought for him.

“Listen carefully to what the owner of the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion tells you.”

Newie nodded repeatedly at Grandel.

With Grandel's arrangement, Newie was going to help at the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion starting today. It would only be for a short time, but he

would learn how to cook from the owner while working as his assistant. Grandel didn't look the part of a shield knight at all with his lanky build and the way he carried his nicely wrapped umbrella like a staff. Between the gentlemanly Grandel, with his trimmed handlebar mustache and smart dress even on his day off, and Newie trailing behind him, the two were the picture of a master and servant, or perhaps a master and apprentice.

Better butter him up and steal his recipes, Newie thought in typical ex-thief fashion. But those could also be the thoughts of a new apprentice, too. His master gave him attention and trained him well; the man's daughter, Emily, had begun frequenting Sunlight's Canopy and left him rather lonely. Newie was becoming more and more like a chef's apprentice both in appearance and in disposition. You could say those days were fulfilling in their own way.

And then there was the last slave, Jay.

"Hhhhhhhh, ffffffffh!"

In a corner of the stable where none of the raptors currently stayed, Jay screamed wordlessly through his crushed vocal cords as Franz punished him.

"I can overlook eating a few bits of orc meat for the raptors, but not when you replace it with rotting, second-rate stuff and steal the change."

Yuric, the animal trainer of the Black Iron Freight Corps, was present. If the raptors sensed their food was different, Yuric would know. But Jay was shortsighted enough to give them meat that wasn't just lower rank but *rotting*, which shocked even Franz.

The Corps had a rough idea of the crimes that the three slaves had committed from the slave trader Reymond, so some amount of sticky fingers was overlooked.

Also, everyone in the Corps knew how much Sieg had grown since he'd met Mariela. For these three slaves, they wanted to recognize their individual personalities, bring out their strong points, and gradually let them be more independent.

But this act of Jay's was unacceptable. The Black Iron Freight Corps used the raptors to pull their armored carriages through the Fell Forest. Although the

effects of the monster-warding potions reduced the danger, it was by no means a safe trip. Raptors were important assets with fighting power that rivaled each member of the Corps. Actions that could harm their health were absolutely inexcusable.

At Franz's quiet wrath, Jay felt a fear that chilled him to the core.

Franz was a healer blessed with an excellent constitution, but he always wore a hood low over his eyes and a mask that went above his nose to hide his face. Healing magic leaves traces behind with the appearance of burn scars, and since there were no potions in the Labyrinth City, a person hiding their face wasn't uncommon.

What terrified Jay was Franz's vertical pupils peering at him from under the mask and the steely fingers gripping and prying open his jaw.

Th... This demi-human bastard...

The hand was too big for a human's, with skin so tough it was impossible to make a dent. At the end of every finger was a claw, and the hand hardly looked like it belonged to a human at all.

A race known as demi-humans lived on a continent beyond the sea. They lived longer than humans and resembled beasts. Long ago, they cut off diplomatic relations, and even now, the dwarves were the only ones among them who were friendly with the Empire. However, as if proving the existence of cultural exchange in the past, every once in a while, a human possessing demi-human characteristics was born in the imperial capital. They had to lurk in darkness, actively avoiding the public eye, which only spoke to the circumstances of the diplomatic break.

"I see you have an aching tooth. Perfect."

Gr. Grind-grind. Creak. Creak.

"Ffffffffffffffh...!!!" Jay desperately struggled against the unbearable pain stabbing his skull, but he had no hope of standing against the strength of Franz, who gripped and pulled down the slave's jaw with just one hand.

Riiiiip.

There was a sound of something being torn, and Jay lost consciousness.

A yellowish fluid audibly streamed out, staining his pants and soiling the floor of the stable.

“...Wetting yourself at this age? That’s a first.” He tossed away Jay’s decaying tooth as if it were so much garbage.

Franz produced a conical lump of bluish-black clay and chanted a particular kind of healing magic.

“Been a long time since I used this,” he muttered, stuffing the tip of the cone into the gap of his missing tooth, and Jay was assaulted with a stabbing pain again. His eyes opened and rolled back into his head, and his body trembled and jerked around like a dying fish with a knife stuck in it. He lost consciousness again after the convulsions abated.

The bluish-black false tooth was a convenient charm that stuck to the bone in place of an extracted tooth, connected to the nerves, and changed shape according to the rest of the teeth and the subject’s bite. It was called a Cursed Tooth, and it bordered on illegal.

A respectable healer wouldn’t touch something like this, but when Franz opened a clinic in the slums of the imperial capital, it was often requested for penal laborers and lifelong slaves.

The effect was simple: to give pain. It connected to the nerves of the teeth, and under specific conditions, it caused intense pain similar to what Jay had experienced when his tooth was forcibly removed. His slave brand could activate the effect. Think of it as strengthening the mark of subordination.

Anything that influenced the psychology of the subject—including brands given to slaves, oath magic, and contract magic—could be classified under the same magical system.

The most common was contract magic, established by using ink with blood to sign a special form that would execute the magic. The effect differed depending on the rank. For the lowest-ranked ones, when the contract was broken and a party to the contract became aware of it, the ink mixed with the violator’s blood changed color as proof of the impropriety.

In high-ranked magical contracts, the contract stipulations were etched into the parties' psyche. When they got close to unintentionally breaking it, a "warning symptom" would activate—for example, a headache or labored breathing. The warning symptoms were not unbearable, but they became more severe if the contract was broken on purpose.

All magical contracts provided proof of a breach, but there was nothing that forced the contract holders to keep their promises. Protecting contracts and handing down punishments was the job of the justice department.

When it came to confidentiality contracts, they could cause temporary memory loss to prevent any information from leaking. But in the private sector, the thought that the culprit had "broken a promise" was enough to trigger its effects.

With an oath, the warning effects were activated when one party became aware that they've "told a lie."

In the case of lifelong slaves and penal laborers, their marks of subordination granted the masters to change the "key" that triggered these warning symptoms—from telling a lie to breaking a promise. These marks restricted their behavior without their consent, meaning they weren't given to debt laborers. After all, they had human rights. They were forced to work until they cleared their debt, which meant their Contract of Servitude didn't involve any branding. The details of their contract were the usual: "Obey your master's commands. Don't run away. Don't cause harm." Of course, these vague details made the warning symptoms weak, too.

But combine a Contract of Servitude with a slave brand, and its coercion became stronger, too. This was because the master could designate specific orders through the brand. By using the largest brand known to man, the slave would be completely manipulable, and the master would be able to control it for a short period of time—just look at Robert Aguinas and the bandit that he'd commanded without any regard for his personal will.

That said, the magical power in an Order decayed over time. And if the slave resisted the warning symptoms in protest of outrageous Orders, its magical effects would begin to weaken. That was why those imposing unreasonable

Orders onto their slaves chose to plant Cursed Teeth or use other methods to up the effects of the warning symptoms.

To think the day would come when I used a Cursed Tooth myself... Franz looked down at Jay with cold eyes as he lay there unconscious and convulsing.

When he had opened a clinic in the slums of the imperial capital where he was prepared to conduct borderline illegal activities, many of the slaves with Cursed Teeth had complained they were innocent. Which could have been true. After all, their masters were deviants who took pleasure in inflicting pain.

The fact that he needed to hide his face behind a mask spoke volumes about Franz's bloodline. Even with the mask, he drew the attention of those around him. It was the same for Yuric, whose accent and facial features made the young animal trainer appear foreign, but the two of them had managed to get the authority to establish a clinic in the slums. That was before Franz had become fed up with his work of making the weak even weaker. He had relinquished everything and accepted the Black Iron Freight Corps' invitation with his foster child, Yuric. And yet, here he was—doing what he had done back then.

Franz was dumbfounded by Jay's low intelligence. Jay must not have thought that earning a profit from swapping out the raptors' meat for a rotten, cheap substitute was something that would hurt his masters. Even if that thought had crossed his mind, his awareness must have been low enough to trigger only the slightest of warning symptoms. He must have been a habitual criminal since his time spent at the slave trader Reymond's business.

After casting a glance at the foolish man who'd reminded him of his unpleasant past, Franz left Jay lying in the stable, departing the Black Iron Freight Corps' base to have lunch with Yuric, who would soon finish the morning transport and return to the Labyrinth City.

When Jay woke up with his new Cursed Tooth, it was well past noon. The throbbing pain in his head was still there, which must have woken him up.

His pants had been soiled with his own urine—revolting. He needed to clean the stable, too. Jay couldn't stand to endure another punishment. He stood, slowly, using the lifestyle magic Water to sloppily wash the floor, changed out

of his soiled clothes, and tossed them in a laundry basket.

I'm starvin'...

Since he lost consciousness before noon, he hadn't had lunch yet. With his hand clutching his sore cheek, he headed to the dining hall and took one person's portion of bread and soup, and just a little bit of meat.

The Black Iron Freight Corps was an all-male household with the sky as their proverbial roof. On this base, thoughtfulness and consideration were in short supply. The bread, meat, and soup had been left out without even a cloth or lid to cover it, leaving the bread dry and hard, and the cold soup had a thin membrane over it. The meat, too, was leftovers. Only fatty scraps remained, and those had become dry and rubbery. That said, the Corps had set aside Jay's meal, and that alone was thoughtful enough.

Woulda been nice if they'd woken me up, he grumbled in his head. He picked up a piece of meat and tossed it into his mouth, chomping down on it as always.

Ah! Gack! Pain shot through the Cursed Tooth, as if he'd been struck with a hammer.

Yow! Oow! Jeez! The jolt went past his teeth, zinging his cheekbone with a throbbing pain. *What's happenin'? What is this shit?! That seriously hurts!*

The nerves connected to the Cursed Tooth were oversensitive. This would die down over time. However, Jay didn't know this and held his cheek in despair.

Can't I have the satisfaction of eatin' my fill? Son of a bitch. This is all just beast food!

Between the raptors and a penal laborer like Jay, the former was far more valuable. It wasn't every day that you found masters who allowed penal laborers to eat three meals a day—and meat for lunch at that. The cattle were fed better than Sieg when he was a debt laborer.

Jay didn't reflect on his own part in this at all, spewing resentment instead. That was when a damp, smelly cloth flew through the air, slapping against his skin.

What the hell?! When he whipped around in anger, he saw Nick carrying a

bag of tools and scowling at him.

Jay had tossed that cloth in the laundry basket just before: It was his pair of pants stained with his own urine. He'd intended for Nick—who was in charge of laundry—to wash his soiled clothing without rinsing them first. In the process of tossing his pants in the basket, he'd soiled the laundry in there already.

Nick was furious, glaring at Jay as if to threaten that he wouldn't think twice about using his tools on him.

You son of a bitch, Jay mentally cursed, picking up his own dirty pants before going to wash them himself.

Damn it! Damn it all!

At the washing spot in the rear yard of the Black Iron Freight Corps, Jay cleaned his dirty pants, stomping on them to get the stains out. He only had one change of clothes. He couldn't afford not to do laundry.

Why is Nick allowed to carry around tools?! And Newie gets a cookin' knife! Why them?! Why not me?!

This is unfair! Ridiculous! Why do they get special treatment?!

Nick had been entrusted with tools and helped with maintenance as ordered.

Newie had been given a cooking knife and prepared meals as ordered.

Jay had been handed money, refused to follow orders—instead buying inferior products and pocketing the difference. He couldn't comprehend something that was so easy to understand.

Damn it! Screw it! Damn! It's all because that smiley punk tricked me!

As he trampled his drenched pants in anger, Jay recalled the day Lynx had taken him out for lunamagia gathering.



On the day after Jay had realized the Black Iron Freight Corps had secretly taken the medicinal herbs somewhere, he followed Lynx.

He confirmed with his own eyes that Lynx had gone into the storehouse in the middle of the night. Jay hid, waiting for him to come back out.

He sure is slow...

Although there was only one entrance, where Jay waited a long time, Lynx didn't come out.

It was strange. Just as he was about to peek inside, Lynx called out to him.

"Jay, what're you doing?" His voice came from *behind* Jay, outside of the storehouse.

Wh-when did he...?

Lynx was a scout in the Black Iron Freight Corps; Jay barely stood a chance of successfully tailing him.

"Jay, *stay quietly in your room at night*, okay?" Lynx Ordered with a laugh, and his smiley eyes became especially smiley. He must have seen through Jay's plan.

Jay had no choice but to head for his own room.

There had been a one-in-a-million chance that he'd be able to follow Lynx. But even if he had succeeded, he would have been devoured by monsters in the Fell Forest before he'd even reached the entrance to the underground Aqueduct. Let's say there was a miracle, and he managed to reach the Aqueduct. The only future for him would have been as slime food.

Damn it! Screw it! Damn it all! There was no way Jay was just going to withdraw—or know that his life had been spared.

If I just knew what they were carryin', I might have a rough idea of where they were goin'.

While Lynx and the others had been out, Jay had searched every nook and cranny of the base. He even rooted through the trash—slime tanks. He'd coated thread in the sticky lubricating oil used for the armored carriages, lowered it into the tanks, and retrieved documents that had been crumpled and thrown away. When it was shopping day, he tied up the documents in his stack,

pretended to leave, and made his way to a familiar food shop in the slums.

“Zat ye, Jacob? Not dead yet, eh?” called out a petite, middle-aged man who appeared to be the shopkeeper. He came out from the back of the shop, dragging one leg behind him.

He must have started drinking at noon; the reek of alcohol drifted from the gaps between his sparse yellow teeth. His brown clothes looked like they hadn't been washed in days. All in all, his appearance was not what you'd expect of someone handling food in a shop. Even the slave Jay wore cleaner attire than him.

Jay tried to convey why he was there by pushing the documents from the slime tank at the man and gesturing.

“Whazzis? Ye can't talk? Ga-ha-hah, ye've done it this time. Ye used ta charge me money fer even the most useless information.” He looked at Jay and laughed crudely. “So? Ye want me ta read 'em?”

Although he grimaced in displeasure at the shopkeeper's vulgar chuckle, Jay nodded.

“That'll be one large silver coin. Ye have that much, right? Yer with the Black Iron Freight Corps now, after all. Yer job's buyin' feed fer the raptors, eh?”

The shopkeeper went to the magical tool for refrigeration at the back of the shop and took out a hunk of meat that had turned brown. One large silver coin could have been an even exchange for the quantity, but this was spoiled scraps.

Isn' that stuff even worse than usual? Jay glanced at the shopkeeper and scowled.

“Ye haven't been in here fer a while, so it got a little old. Fiiine, fine. How 'bout this?” he said and threw in a bottle of cheap alcohol.

While Jay was at Reymond's slave trading company, he'd been in charge of buying feed for the customers' cavalry animals. He bought stale food that only the poorest people in the slums would buy and pocketed the difference. Even if the raptors complained that it wasn't the freshest, the only one who could understand them was the animal trainer, Yuric. Even then, Yuric would only complain if the food offered to them was exceptionally bad. Up until now, his

secret had been under wraps, and he'd made a tidy profit.

Jay looked at the offered alcohol, licked his upper lip, and paid the large silver coin. Then he pestered the shopkeeper to read the documents as he immediately began drinking.

"Mm, this's a certification of tax payments. Ye sure 'bout bringin' this here? Lunamagia. Fruit of a treant. Bones from a bone knight. And this here says nigill buds. What's this? Has the Black Iron Freight Corps started doin' business with an alchemist? Fer a group who can travel through the Fell Forest, they sure are stingy 'bout their deals."

Whaaat? An alchemist? No way someone like that's here. This's the Labyrinth City.

There ought to be a hint somewhere. Jay wanted to have a better look, so he spread out the other crumpled paper scraps, demanding the man read them. However, after he'd read the scraps from corner to corner, no documents with any apparent significance besides the certification of tax payments on potion ingredients could be found.

No way. You gotta be kiddin' me!

Once his drink was gone, Jay took the rotting meat and the bundle of papers, preparing to leave. The shopkeeper looked at him and laughed crudely. Jay had guessed wrong, it seemed.

"Heh-heh, too bad, Jacob. Well, come back and buy meat again some other time."

Jay certainly had guessed wrong.

The Labyrinth City charged taxes on goods when they were taken out through its massive front gate. Most transportation groups would pay for both the goods and the taxes at the same time, receiving a certificate of tax payment at the shop. Otherwise, calculating taxes on each product at the gate would delay their departure. The certificate was affixed to official papers and sealed inside the box holding the product, which simplified the final check at the large front gate.

Every once in a while, those who wanted to evade taxes would place unpaid

goods in a box with paid goods, concealing them under the floor of a carriage or carrying them out of a gate beforehand to hide them. But the guards were used to this kind of behavior, capable of sniffing them out and levying a hefty fine.

Jay guessed the Black Iron Freight Corps was moving products nightly to dodge taxes. However, the paper in his hands showed that the taxes had been paid. If it had been thrown away, the products had been transported somewhere within the Labyrinth City. The Corps had expressly paid dues on the portion that would be used within the City and didn't require taxing in the first place, and they even pretended to take the goods outside the City. And the contents of the cargo...

There's really an alchemist? In the Labyrinth City?

That must have been why he was smelling money.

And a huge mountain of it, at that. Too big for me to mess with...

The potions created in the Labyrinth City were only effective within the City's ley-line region, and the Corps were bringing in a lot of materials. Meaning an equivalent number of potions had to be made. But they weren't circulating in the City. Where on earth had they disappeared?

That would explain why those guys in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces hang out here.

The Black Iron Freight Corps was secretly supplying potions to the Labyrinth Suppression Forces.

If it were a shady little get-rich-quick scheme, he'd be ready to get his hands dirty in it, but this was dangerous. Carelessly getting involved with an alchemist could mean being erased and tossed into a slime tank.

Son of a bitch. I wasted a large silver coin on worthless information...

Although the money had been entrusted to him to buy raptor feed, Jay felt as though he'd been swindled out of his own savings, and he was enraged.

On that day, Jay hadn't tossed the rotting meat he'd exchanged for a large silver coin—or even mixed it into the fresh meat. Instead, he had given it to the raptors as it was. When Yuric and Franz heard them complaining, he was

punished with the Cursed Tooth.

Yuric had threatened to make Jay into slime food, and Franz only had good intentions when he punished Jay with the Cursed Tooth to pacify Yuric.

Damn it! Damn it all to hell! Jay stomped on the soiled pants, cleaning them with his kicks. Just thinking about it made him angry.

He'd taken great pains to fetch those scraps of paper from the slime tanks! And it had been for nothing!

And I bet that asshole is usin' my money to sip some good booze right about now!

He redirected his anger to the shopkeeper who took his money and handed over meat that he'd immediately seen was rotten.

Ain't it Nick's job to do the washin' today?! And he pushed it onto me!

Nick had used the tool in his hand to threaten Jay, intimidating him into washing his own clothes soiled by his own blunder. Jay hated him.

I just know Newie's eatin' his fill right now!

He was jealous of Newie, who'd been taken by Grandel and even given a cooking knife to help at the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion.

They got money! And power! But I get punished for every little thing! What's a guy gotta do to get some proper treatment?!

Franz had yanked out his tooth, and all the members of the Black Iron Freight Corps had roughed him up. He envied them all.

Damn it! Screw it all! They can all rot in hell!

I hate them! Lucky bastards! Why can't I be like them?!

Jay was doing the bare minimum, as he cursed them all. He cleaned the stable just enough so that no one would complain.

As if responding to these innermost feelings, the Cursed Tooth sent throbbing pain into his skull.

Damn! What the hell?! This is all bullshit!

He was seething in hatred, jealousy, and desire.

Jay went through his entire day nurturing these feelings before crawling into the bed given to him. But in his agitated state and with the stabbing pain of his Cursed Tooth, he just couldn't get himself to sleep.

Do I gotta live with this body forever now? Yow! Damn tooth. And I can't speak. Ah, son of a bitch. Why? Why me?

If anyone could have heard his internal monologue, they would have been shocked at his exaggerations.

If Jay behaved properly, the Cursed Tooth wouldn't have hurt him. The pain stemmed from the oversensitivity of the nerves from the implant. And it wasn't *unbearable*. Hadn't the other two slaves found their own paths, even without speaking?

He hadn't been entrusted with tools or a cooking knife but with something even more important: money. Because of the Cursed Tooth, Jay was incapable of understanding the kindness extended to him and how he had betrayed that trust.

With his B-Rank power, Sieg had fallen to the brink of death, recovered, and grown to be a more respectable human being than before he'd become a slave. This was why the members of the Black Iron Freight Corps wanted to give Jay and the rest of their slaves a chance, but Jay couldn't even comprehend that.

Damn it! Damn them! To hell!

He was jealous of everything, envied everyone, and despised the whole world around him.

If even a single thing wasn't to his liking, Jay cursed his lot in life.

Full of nothing but resentment and envy, Jay didn't realize his own circumstances were the direct consequences of the things he'd done.

Even to the end, Jay couldn't grasp that his inescapable dissatisfaction was equivalent to dissatisfaction with himself.





“Yeah, it’s melting well.” Mariela peered into a wide-mouthed vial in her atelier early in the afternoon.

Amber was tending Sunlight’s Canopy for her, and Nierenberg had come to prescribe medicine, so she could afford not to be in the shop. Caroline was busy in her treat-churning atelier. She didn’t even have time to make medicine to sell at Sunlight’s Canopy, so Mariela had been the one in charge of making salves lately. But then, with no one watching, she ended up using alchemy to make medicine. In her free time, she could even make potions.

Sieg’s group had left to go wyvern hunting early in the morning, so there was no time for Sieg to tend to the medicinal herb garden or help with housework. However, Nierenberg’s daughter, Sherry, helped Mariela out—along with Amber, whenever she found herself with too much downtime. It wasn’t a big deal.

A long, narrow plant was being soaked in the vial, and Mariela had added just a little slime acid. After the corrosive liquid had finished its work, she hoisted the vial, carried it to the sink installed in the atelier, and emptied the contents into a sieve above the sink. When water rushed over the plant, the mesophyll came off, leaving only the veins.

The slime-based acid in the vial was caustic—in other words, highly corrosive to plants and animals. The mixture was created by adding salt to a Slime-in-a-Vial with the lightning attribute. This slime spat out caustic acid—along with gas that could rust metal. It was harder to manage than normal slimes, and it could only be found in specialty shops that handled slime acid. The specialized vessel for this slime was extremely fascinating to Mariela. Because the gas dissolved in water, it was collected by passing it through an attached glass pipe containing many layers of water.

The burbling bubbles flowed out of the glass tube, passed through the water tank and the arrangement of complicated glass devices into the filter attached to the last outlet. This contraption was engrossing to Mariela. Every time she

went shopping for acid, she stuck to them like a slime and gazed at them. In the early days when she got a large amount of money, she almost bought these things on a particularly profligate whim, but Sieg stopped her.

“It’s not as if you need acid every day, right? Besides, what would you do if the glass container broke? The sacred tree window frames would rust. And they went out of their way to make them for you. You’d need to be sure to check the filter and the liquid every day. If you only want it because it’s a living thing, that’s not good.”

“B-but, you know... If I bought it, I could look at it every day. Wouldn’t that be great?”

It wouldn’t be great at all. Mariela had resisted by bringing up advantages—none of which were good ideas. An employee at the slime acid specialty shop told her: “You can look as much as you like. Even if you’re just browsing, I don’t mind.”

The matter was settled, and she didn’t buy anything. Afterward, Mariela was apparently completely satisfied when she obtained the synthetic part-slime, part-kraken creature named Slaken, and she stopped going to the acidic liquid shop. She didn’t have a reason to loiter around those parts anymore. Slaken’s mucus was an expensive material, but it didn’t damage the skin when you touched it. You could say it was the ideal Slime-in-a-Vial for the scatterbrained Mariela to raise.

I had so much fun seeing a caustic slime again after so long. Mariela recalled her shopping trip as she began to wash the veiny remains of the plant. It was called “horse’s mane,” and although it looked pliant, thick veins ran through it. Perhaps it would be more apt to call them arteries. The marrow within these veins was an ingredient for a potion. On the other hand, the mesophyll was harmful, making it necessary to dissolve and wash away.

“Dehydrate, Pulverize.”

She dried the clean horse’s mane with alchemy, then took a variety of fruits and dried leaves from a cupboard and pulverized them all together. After putting the powdered medicinal herbs in a thick porcelain container, she poured into it the matergo oil that had just been delivered from Merle’s Spices.

After mixing them thoroughly, she heated them in a magical tool.

Matergo was a pungent oil taken from seeds as small as grains of sand. It was used for body wellness and for cooking, but since it had a unique flavor, it was often used as seasoning. This time, she was using it for solvent extraction. Before she placed it in the pot, she dissolved Drops of Life into it. When the components of horse's mane dissolved in oil, its viscosity increased, hardening it at room temperature. It required you heat it to keep it in a liquid state to extract them. As she moved to a different task, Mariela marveled at the convenience of this world. Things that she'd used to do with alchemy could now be taken care of with magical tools. The next task couldn't be done at the same time as other tasks, so she had become able to work much more efficiently thanks to magical tools.

"Transmutation Vessel, Pulverize."

She pulverized the lunamagia she recently collected with Sieg in the Transmutation Vessel, then began to control the temperature and airflow within it. In another Transmutation Vessel, she cooled water infused with Drops of Life. She used a nozzle to spray it on the finely powdered lunamagia, controlling the temperature and gas in the nozzle.

When she first came to the Labyrinth City, she couldn't do this without the cylindrical container from Ghark. But since then, she'd been making a hundred potions every day for half a year. Eventually, the number of simultaneous alchemical processes increased, and now she could cover everything with just alchemy apart from the nozzle. The small size of the cylindrical container prevented her from making a hundred potions all at once, but the fact that she'd been able to shorten the creation time was a big help to Mariela.

When the small ice crystals and the lunamagia powder within the Transmutation Vessel made contact, the ice crystals took on a yellow hue and began to glow. Lunamagia extraction happened when solids came in contact with it. This process progressed faster if the contact area of the lunamagia and ice was larger. In short, it was better for the lunamagia and ice pieces to be small. The lunamagia was finely crushed, and it would have ignited the instant it left the Transmutation Vessel. She wanted to make the ice crystals finer, but this was limited by the size of the nozzle.

If I practice a little more, I bet I could somehow use alchemy in place of the nozzle...

Mariela extracted the lunamagia as she thought.

Next were the arawne petals, thousand-night flower petals, and lund petioles. Since they'd all been processed and stored previously, the extraction was easy. She mixed them with the lunamagia extract, pouring the resulting purple liquid into a large glass vial that looked like it was soaking fruit wine. For the finishing touch, she added one fresh sacred tree leaf and sealed the container.

"As for the horse's mane..... Yeah, that's probably fine."

It was better if the oil was set aside. The medicinal herb components had begun to dissolve, turning the oil a deep amber color. Though it was heated up, it had turned viscous like toffee. She took it from the container and placed it in a Transmutation Vessel, added an equal amount of killer bee honey, and used an alchemical skill to mix them. A mixer was inadequate for combining high viscous things, but with alchemical skills, it was done immediately. As she lowered the pressure in the Transmutation Vessel and sent the honeyed fluid flying, she kneaded it and kept the temperature constant.

The blended amber mass had the appearance of cloudy, hardened toffee. She divided it into eight pieces of equal size that could be held in one hand, connected them to a cord within the Transmutation Vessel, and spun them around at high speed with *Rapid Rotation*. Each finished lump had been split through centrifugal force into a light brown elliptical portion with medicinal herb residue and a transparent amber elliptical portion. When she lowered them to room temperature, both types of lumps solidified, and when she pressed hard on one, it had waxlike flexibility that made it appear to change shape. She put these lumps in a vial one at a time with the transparent ones on top.

"And the specialized lung magic medicine is complete!" she announced.

Mariela placed the vial of completed liquid and the vial of lumps into a box and began to tidy up the room.

"A specialized lung potion isn't liquid, which means it's magical medicine, I think. It's a little unusual," Mariela said, acting the part of an alchemist "from

the imperial capital.”

The shop had yet to open, and Mariela was answering Nierenberg’s questions.

“You know that thing where you breathe in smoke through water? Would you call it a water pipe? It’s the same thing. You burn the solid medicine, running the resulting smoke through the liquid one and inhaling it. When the smoke goes through the liquid, that’s when it’s done. You have to suck it in immediately, but it goes directly into your lungs, so it’s very effective.”

The soldiers who inhaled the gas on the fifty-sixth stratum had survived thanks to Nierenberg’s medical team. Now they suffered from chronic lung disease, so Mariela had made this magic medicine to cure them.

“For this one, you scrape off the transparent part and burn it. When you store it as is, the transparent part and the dregs will separate. If you put it on the bottom, they’ll mix. You have to be careful. Oh, and if you smoke the dregs, you’ll feel good and have nice dreams. That’s what I’ve heard anyway.”

If it was a normal potion, she’d throw the residue away, but this specialized lung magic medicine was apparently sold with its dregs. Mariela didn’t know this, but the residue causing the “nice dreams” was commonly known as “dream incense” and fetched a high price. The idea of inhaling smoke for nice dreams sounded like degeneracy at its finest, but the substance was mild, with no side effects or addictive qualities. Well, if you didn’t consider mumbling in your sleep a “side effect.”

If you burned dream incense as incense without using a water pipe, you wouldn’t have any dreams, but it would briefly send your mind and body into a deep slumber.

Regardless, it would help one feel refreshed upon waking up, making it a popular product among tired adults and busy people who had no time to sleep. Due to its desirability, some people would even ask for specialized lung magic medicine just to get their hands on it.

With the specialized lung magic medicine, the soldiers afflicted with lung disease were cured. As for those who suffered from hallucinations of Black Fiends, the dregs gave them sweet dreams, helping them return to the front

lines. It was never confirmed whether comical sleep-talking could be heard from the Schutzenwald siblings' bedroom, but it was helpful in maintaining morale in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces who still couldn't enter the fifty-sixth stratum.

"Is that alchemist a mind reader?!" With dream incense in his hand, Weishardt was even more amazed by Mariela.

Of course, there was no way Weishardt wouldn't know about dream incense. There was a little part of his guilty conscience that spoke up when he thought about indulging in it.

Nierenberg, who had recently come to understand Mariela himself, considered the matter briefly before offering Weishardt his own share of sweet dreams fragrance and returning to Sunlight's Canopy.

CHAPTER 4

A Mountain in the Way





01



“Mr. Ghark, I look forward to working with you today! I have the results of the ten-day investigation!” shouted Gypsum, a young scout of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces.

He handed Ghark the document with a look of admiration.

Ten days after the previous survey, Ghark had received word from the Labyrinth Suppression Forces that they’d managed to enter the fifty-sixth stratum, and he went to meet them a second time. The bespectacled man with a calm demeanor was serving as his assistant again.

As he scanned the survey results, Ghark compared them to the collected samples lined up on the desk and wrote something in the report.

The samples had been collected by Gypsum, who followed Ghark’s lead. Ten days ago, Ghark’s group had used syringes to aspirate the gas and pass it through liquid, and they’d thrown a variety of minerals and metals into the fifty-sixth stratum before pulling them out. However, all of these reacted to a particular gas or deteriorated at a fixed temperature range. With no scale indicating the density or quantity, they performed Material Appraisal on the changed objects to understand the situation. It wasn’t at the same level as Ghark’s, but Gypsum had the Material Appraisal skill, too. And he was extremely athletic on top of that, so he was assigned to the scout unit of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces.

Ghark had developed a method of applying Material Appraisal to labyrinth exploration, and he’d released this information not only to soldiers of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces who’d been enlisted for a long time, but also to the Adventurers Guild. However, there was a big difference between learning from books and learning from direct experience. After he finished reading the report, Ghark handed it back to Gypsum, who was waiting tensely.

“This ain’t bad, but it needs a little more precision.”

“Th-thank you very much! I can’t believe I’m receiving instruction from a legendary scout!” Gypsum’s eyes sparkled in delight.

“If ye’ve got time to look at this feeble old man, go look at the materials and appraise ’em,” Ghark replied, waving his hand indifferently.

“Boy, he’s so lucky. Sir, teach me something, too,” asked his assistant. His tone of voice was calm, not too high or low, but it didn’t sound as envious as his words suggested.

“Ye don’t have the Appraisal ability, so ye don’t need this kinda knowledge in the first place,” Ghark answered, exasperated.

“Ouch,” replied his assistant, without flinching at all.

“Um, is that gentleman not your apprentice, Mr. Ghark?”

Outsiders shouldn’t be able to get involved with the Labyrinth Suppression Forces in the first place. Gypsum thought the assistant had to be Ghark’s apprentice blessed with the Appraisal skill.

“That one just came to me of his own accord and won’t leave me alone.”

“My name is Voyd. I am the husband of Mr. Ghark’s granddaughter. If anything were to happen to him, my wife would grieve.”

Put kindly, the assistant appeared harmless. To put it bluntly, he seemed as weak as they come. However, Ghark wouldn’t bring him along if he served no purpose at all. Although it didn’t make sense to Gypsum, he accepted it. “Then, shall we go?”

The three men donned their protective clothing once again and headed to the deepest part of the Labyrinth through the Labyrinth Suppression Forces’ underground route.

On the fifty-fourth stratum, a large-scale pump made from magical stones and the ruins of the Sea-Floating Pillar had been installed in the coastal caverns, sending seawater to the fifty-sixth stratum. The pipe running through the levels was metallic and large enough in diameter that small animals could scuttle through. Once you filled this pipe with water, it would continue to send water

to the lower outlet until air entered its siphon. Because of the Labyrinth's mysterious ability to preserve the climate and environment in each stratum, the water stopped at the stratum's boundary and wouldn't go to the lower one unless it was pumped.

If all they needed was more pipes, they could have secured more. But they only had one pump. And this was limiting the speed at which they could cool the fifty-sixth stratum. But with the Labyrinth maintaining climate and environment, the seawater in the fifty-fourth stratum never ran out.

After ten days of these cooling efforts, the formerly lush fifty-fifth stratum had completely changed.

The water pumped from the fifty-fourth stratum cooled the fifty-sixth and created steam that carried toxic air up to the fifty-fifth. The steam then cooled, changing it into a diluted acidic rain that fell. This destroyed the stratum's greenery, leaving it with only dead trees.

With continuous efforts, the fifty-sixth stratum had apparently finally become cool enough for people to enter. Now only the tiniest puff of steam rose from the stairs. The fifty-fifth stratum's atmospheric components had stabilized. It wouldn't be long before it would be able to self-restore, changing it back into the lush and warm area that it had been in the past.

"Why do we need a pump for water to pass between strata? I mean, the steam can move between them on its own," Voyd murmured as he looked at the wisps of steam.

"Must be because the things on this level hate water," Ghark replied shortly.

After they examined the state of the fifty-sixth stratum from the top of the stairs and confirmed there were no problems, the trio entered the deepest part of the Labyrinth where no one had set foot before.

The air was high in humidity, fogging up their full-face goggles. Even though the toxicity of the air in the fifty-sixth stratum had technically become weaker, there was still enough that they couldn't afford to remove their masks. It was suffocating down there, and not just from the low level of oxygen they could suck in through the masks. The steam was just so dense. The mask filters made from wyvern lungs did a great job purifying the poison and eliminating the

steam. But processing the steam took up a lot of space and contributed to a claustrophobic feeling.

They avoided the path of the steam to maintain visibility, and they found more or less what they expected—a volcanic stratum with hardened lava spreading across the ground. The stairs were partly buried in cooled lava—solidified into rock—and had become a gently sloping cave.

The cave was wide enough for the trio to walk side by side. The ceiling soared above them, and the steam rose up to meet it. There were places where the path narrowed or forked from strewn boulders, but the trio knew it led to a single, wide area.

They proceeded carefully while measuring the composition and temperature of the gas at fixed intervals.

The rocks blanketing the stratum weren't smooth like those found in mountains or rivers, but black and uneven with small holes throughout. Must have been from the hardened lava. They came in an array of sizes. In the mix, there were some that appeared to have broken apart from an explosion. It was said that the volume of water expanded by 1,000 percent when it turned into steam, so the impact must have been responsible.

The rocks scattered everywhere made the floor difficult to walk on. They would crumble as the trio tried to get across. Rocks had clustered together in unexpected places, too, impeding the trio's progress.

There were times when tremors rocked the ground with indescribable sounds, causing the piles of rocks to tumble down and crumble. The three had to be careful near those rocks. They had the potential to crumble during one of the tremors. And who knew? They could be scorching hot on the inside.

The trio picked out a cooler location where water must have surged through, heading along the dried stream. It wasn't very cool at all. The insides of the rocks burned red, hot enough to cause rolled scraps of paper to combust on contact.

With huffs of poison gas, bursts of blistering steam, and falling rocks, it was a hellish landscape. The only problem was that the three had yet to encounter any monsters since entering this stratum.

Of course, as scouts, they were careful to move discreetly, but there weren't any monsters to notice them in the first place.

Wish a golem woulda come out or somethin', Ghark thought.

If only there were more small fry. The magical power in the stratum would be divided accordingly, and the power of the stratum boss and its guardians would become weaker. But they couldn't be further from a monster assault. In fact, there was no sign of a monster at all.

Steam spouted upward, and the temperature rose as they proceeded inward, avoiding the occasional rock that burst into pieces. The heat resistance of their protective clothing was beginning to fail. For the Labyrinth Suppression Forces to advance here, they needed to cool the stratum or use some other means.

Volcanic gas had rushed out onto the level when this stratum opened, most likely due to the high internal pressure building behind the seal before it was released. Under normal circumstances, it would have been consumed by the layer of lava covering the stratum. There shouldn't have been any oxygen.

And yet, there was—albeit it was low, as in high altitudes, but they could still breathe.

It was proof that a monster lived here, breathing in this air—resisting high temperature, defying pressure, unaffected by this poisonous gas.

What could it be?

Rrrrrrrumble.

Another earth tremor.

They wouldn't be able to withstand anything hotter than this. Just as they were about to turn back, Voyd suddenly raised a hand and ducked into the shade of a rock to examine the stratum.

The other two followed suit and flattened themselves against the rock. Hot lava spread on the other side of the passage, glowing red on the ground everywhere. In certain places, the radiance was so powerful that it hurt their eyes to look at it. It must have been pools of lava.

"Hawk Eye," called out the scout from the Labyrinth Suppression Forces.

Gypsum had activated a type of skill to look at long-range distances. It allowed the user to see things obstructed by obstacles. Ghark and Voyd peered through magical tools to look far away. They weren't as effective as Hawk Eye, but these bent the streams of light and allowed them to see on the other side of obstacles, which couldn't be done with the naked eye.

Beyond their hiding place under the rock was a space that stretched on forever with pools upon pools of lava, making them feel as if they were back outside.

Rrrrrrrumble. Another tremor made their way to them.

Oh, this must be the source. That much they could comprehend.

It shook the stratum as it slowly, slowly advanced on eight—or more—legs.

They knew it was walking, but there was one thing they couldn't wrap their heads around.

"Is that...a volcano?"

The volcano with short legs crawled forward through the sprawling stratum.

"Grooooooooooar!" Something else had made a sound that shook the air and took flight from the peak of the volcano.

"Just as I thought. A dragon would hate this, eh?"

They had lowered the temperature and pressure of the stratum, allowing humans to enter. Did the dragon find it comfortable—or the opposite? From this great distance, they had no way of reading its facial expression.

Either way, a huge dragon with dark lava-red scales had spread its wings, leisurely soaring through the sky of the fifty-sixth stratum.

"I knew there would be one."

After hearing the report from Ghark's group, Leonhardt frowned. Everyone assembled in the council room had expected a dragon to arrive.

The tenacious creature could thrive in high temperatures, pressure, and even poison gas. The difficulty of defeating one went without saying. Dragons were classified as the most powerful monsters in existence.

“But a moving volcano?”

They had never heard of such a monster. By definition, the mountain should have been secure to the ground, but they’d seen it themselves, separated from the earth by short legs. Those appendages were the only part of it that moved, and the volcano had no visible head or body part that might belong to a living creature. It was a small mountain that could be circled in an hour, but it was slightly elliptical. At the top was a bowl-shaped crater. The number of legs could only be visually confirmed on the side facing them, and they’d counted four, which meant it had at least eight. The thick, squat legs supporting the heavy volcano moved excruciatingly slowly.

It must have been something like a turtle, based on the shape of its legs and the slowness of its gait. But it had no eyes, nose, or mouth. It was a mountain with no head, hardly resembling any living creature. It only toddled forward, spouting smoke from its peak.

It would head to pools of lava that bubbled out of the earth and dip into them, soaking its cluster of legs to absorb the lava and leave it empty. It moved around seeking these pots of lava as food.

It was more accurate to call it replenishment than a meal. But after absorbing lava, the volcano’s movements would become a tad more energetic, and it would spout gas and erupting rocks and lava with a burp-like sound.

The dragon was thought to be the volcano’s guardian, and the crater might have been its nest. The circuits it flew around the stratum always began and ended there.

“At any rate, we can’t develop a strategy without more information. Weishardt?”

“Yes. Fortunately, the cooled temperature has not changed. Same can be said for the composition of the air. The volcano’s gas and oscillation of the temperature do not seem to affect the dragon in the fifty-sixth stratum. I believe we should move forward with cooling the stratum and replace the air to make conditions more favorable for our activities. Let us also have the scout unit proceed with investigating the volcano and the dragon. As for which potions will be most helpful, we shall have Nierenberg gather information from

the alchemist.”

Even if there was nothing but despair on the horizon, they had to do what they could.

Leonhardt slowly rose from his seat along with everyone else assembled in the council room, ready to take the next steps.



02



“Hey, Mariela! Let’s grab some grub after the hunt tomorrow! I found a great place.”

“A feast!” Mariela cried, delighted that Lynx had invited her to dinner.

For the rest of the wyvern subjugation mission, the three men had pretended to collapse on the ground, playing dead, and hunted quite a few that way. And yet, they still hadn’t managed to reach A Rank. Even after the hunt was over, they were going to have to go into the Labyrinth to complete more requests.

After the subjugation was over, the Black Iron Freight Corps returned to normal operations and departed for the imperial capital once again. This time, the three who remained in the Labyrinth City were Malraux, Edgan, and Lynx. Lieutenant Malraux was researching policies that could be implemented once the monster-warding potions started circulating in the market. For this reason, it was best to have Edgan and Lynx increase their strength, since they had potential, and Jay joined the traveling party this time.

“Huh? Where are Sieg and Edgan?”

“They’ve got something else going on. It’ll just be the two of us.”

Mariela had been under the impression that this would be a group outing. But when the subjugation came to a close on the following day, the only person who came to meet her at Sunlight’s Canopy was Lynx. She cocked her head to the side in confusion.

This might be the first time Mariela and Sieg had ever had dinner apart while Sieg was in the Labyrinth City. While Sieg's group had been out to hunt, Mariela had enjoyed lunches and tea with Caroline, Elmera, and other regulars. Sieg must have had his social obligations, too. But Mariela still couldn't shake this weird feeling.

"I think the only time we've gone out by ourselves was when I first came to this city, Lynx."

"Huh. Yeah. Can't believe it's already been six months."

And now we're close enough to talk about our memories together, Mariela thought as she followed Lynx, reminiscing on the time between her awakening and now.

"We're here. The chef here used to work in the imperial capital."

Whenever they went out to eat, they'd always gone to the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion. But Lynx had brought her to a very fancy restaurant. There wasn't a dress code or anything, and it wasn't a place frequented by the upper class. But there wasn't a single brash customer yelling a drunken soliloquy at the top of their lungs. Most of the customers were couples, and the women were a little dressed up. This restaurant had come at Amber's recommendation. Apparently, the place was all the rage among women these days.

The dishes were arranged artfully in bite-size portions, and they were brought out in courses. The drink menu listed concoctions that she'd never heard of before. After listening to her rattle off her preferences, Lynx and the server chose a drink for Mariela that was a blend of several fruit juices with slices of fruit cut into fancy shapes decorating the rim of the glass. It made her think of a bird from a southern country. Each new dish was something she'd never tried before. They were all mouthwatering, but Mariela worried if Lynx would be full after all this, since he always polished off more than double what the average person ate.

"What a great meal! That was delicious," Mariela exclaimed, getting ready to pay.

"I already took care of the check," Lynx said.

Malraux had taught him a smooth way to handle the payment, making sure to do it while Mariela was in the restroom.

“You should stress that you’re treating to her a really expensive meal,” Edgan had said. But all his advice was obviously questionable, so Lynx chose to ignore it.

His strategy was to take her to a fancy restaurant—Amber’s recommendation and women’s favorite—escort her as a perfect gentleman (with the help of Malraux’s pointers), and capture her heart.

I mean, Sieg is a gentleman.

Lynx was closer to Mariela’s age, and he felt they saw eye to eye, too. But Sieg was a formidable foe. His mannerisms were suave with a touch of class, and he wasn’t unattractive, either. Because Mariela hadn’t seen him in this light, Sieg took on the role of a child’s guardian rather than a lady’s escort, but Lynx knew that he couldn’t take him lightly.

All the more reason why he had to show Mariela he was up to the task. According to his plan, he would make a reservation at a popular restaurant and conduct himself as charmingly as Malraux had taught him.

Except that even after they left the restaurant, Mariela kept chattering on about how good the food was. It was as if she was trying to be polite.

I screwed up, Lynx thought.

He had made this reservation knowing that it was popular with younger women. But eating so little at a time and speaking at such a low volume hadn’t suited him at all. Plus, Mariela seemed nervous about occupying a formal space for the first time. She was more subdued than usual. And most importantly, there hadn’t been a whole lot of food, and he felt like he hadn’t eaten at all. Mariela must have noticed he wasn’t satisfied, too.

Lynx had realized he’d put himself first—going through great lengths to get Edgan to distract Sieg—and he had put Mariela on edge in the process.

“Hey, Lynx,” Mariela said as he was lost in thought. “Um, want to go to the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion? I could eat some more. And I’ll pay this time.”

Ha-ha, this girl.

He knew exactly what she was up to. She was full, but she'd made this suggestion because she was concerned Lynx hadn't eaten enough. She must have noticed how uncomfortable that restaurant had made him.

"You're gonna get nice and rooound again, Chubbyela."

"I will not! And that's 'Mariela' to you!" After puffing up her cheeks in anger, she burst into laughter. The pendant Lynx had given her bounced against her chest.

The sun had completely vanished below the horizon, and it was chilly, but he didn't feel the biting winter cold. Every once in a while, they would pass by other people on the street. Some of them were humming drunkards.

"Is that what people mean when they say 'in the prime of life'?"

"If you mean, 'prime' as in 'primal.'"

They giggled softly together as they headed to the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion, where they ordered food as they always did. They talked about the subjugations and the regulars at Sunlight's Canopy. Their conversations were silly, but it carried a natural rhythm, and they never ran out of things to say.

I like that about her...

It was the way she'd subtly try to put a friend at ease, the way she became stiff in a fancy restaurant, the way she would cherish an inexpensive present, the way she would indulge him with inconsequential conversations.

He could be himself—not suave or cool or anything else. And Lynx had never felt more secure.

"You know how skills are passed down?"

This was why Lynx could talk with her about things he'd never told anyone before.

"Orphans in the Labyrinth City look for their parents based on their skills."

"What? Did you find your parents, Lynx?"

"Nope," he replied.

He'd heard Mariela was an orphan, too. There were many people with alchemy skills—in the past and in the present. It wouldn't be possible to identify one's parents unless one had unique skills, like Lynx.

"Of course, it was all in our heads. I mean, some of the kids who were good with spears claimed to be Captain Dick's illegitimate child. Like, ha-ha. Good one. When he was how old? The ages didn't match up."

The orphans aspired to be the next Dick, who had grown up in the orphanage himself. Plus, he always looked older than his age, so Lynx could understand why the other kids would want to pretend to be his. Not that any of them actually believed in this charade.

But Dick couldn't bring himself to be mean to those children.

"Whoa, Dick, I didn't realize you were a womanizer," Amber would chide in jest.

"Please say I'm your brother at the very least," Dick would beg the children, noticing her cold gaze.

After exchanging a look with Lynx, Mariela smiled as she pictured Dick in a fluster.

"Well, an escapist dream of a little kid. If they were in any other city, the orphans might wish for their parents to come get them someday. But in the Labyrinth City, their parents were seldom alive. The kids wanna believe their parents were the best."

"Wow. Was there someone that you wanted to be *your* dad, Lynx?"

Lynx had been laughing up until then, but he widened his eyes, looking into the distance.

"Nah. No one's ever even heard of the shadowmaster skill, so....."

Mariela had never been told the details of the skill, and Lynx had been the first person she'd ever met who possessed it. It had to be rare.

From the little information she'd heard from Sieg, it allowed you to move in the shadows without being noticed by people or monsters. It also created knives from the darkness. It struck Mariela as awfully useful.

“Forging a weapon from the shadows sounds handy. I bet you can make, like, infinite weapons, right?” Mariela asked, changing the subject upon noticing Lynx had started to brood.

He started to look like himself again.

“Nah, it’s not like you’re making shadows into solid objects. Hmm... How can I put it? It’s like ‘intercepting’ something. All monsters and animals have bones and connective muscles where blood flows, so you intercept that a little. At my level, I can only attack with a shadow the size of a knife. Plus, for higher-ranking opponents, you might not be able to get ‘em with a shadow blade—even if you could with a normal sword. Hiding in the shadows doesn’t really mean you’re *in* the shadows. It’s more like shifting my presence into them. I can be somewhere else, but I can make others *think* I’m in the shadows, you know. Meaning if I’m completely surrounded, I can’t sneak away. You’d be surprised at the limits of the skill.”

She thought the secrecy of the skill was important. Was it really okay to talk about it in detail? But then again, this was Mariela. She didn’t understand Lynx’s explanation in the first place.

“I see. I get it! You’re a pro at hide-and-seek,” she concluded with a nod.

“*Bfaw*, what? Well, against you, I’d win even without my skills!” Lynx chuckled.

Mariela was glad he was feeling better.

There’s no way someone with this skill would have an honest job.

He couldn’t say that to Mariela. Not when she believed the shadowmaster skill was unique and rare.

Lynx had a perfect understanding of the rarity of his own skill—and what uses suited it best.



The first time Lynx had become aware of his shadowmaster skill was before he'd reached the age of ten.

As Mariela had excitedly pointed out, he was great at hide-and-seek. No one could ever find him. His other forte was startling people by slipping behind their backs. From a young age, Lynx wondered if this had any relation to a skill.

Maybe I got a super-awesome one!

Any child who felt the future held endless possibilities would think that way.

Many of the children had been born with one or two ordinary skills—possessing no special talents.

But after sneaking into the teacher's room at the orphanage in the middle of the night, Lynx found out the “Other” column in the skill section of his appraisal paper would be red. It was proof that he'd been blessed not with a common talent in swords or magic, but rather with a special, rare ability.

Lynx's life might have been different had he accepted this with joy. But even though he was still young, Lynx knew that this was something that he shouldn't wish for, even if it had the allure of being special.

The kids with “Other” skills were taken from the orphanage to get a proper appraisal and never came back...

He knew people with “Other” skills ended up as slave traders. After a thorough appraisal, those found to have the Contract of Servitude skill received specialized training before they were hired as slave traders. He didn't know what other skills existed in the world nor the occupations of those with these skills. But he knew one thing for sure: Lynx's idol Dick definitely didn't have any of these special skills. The elite of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces pushed ordinary strengths—sword, spear, shield, magic—to their limits, to a level that could not be matched, earning them a spot among the best of the best.

That path had to be difficult. And their destination, too, wasn't sunshine and rainbows. The soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder with death as they confronted the strongest monsters with their own skills and bodies.

For the youth—full of dreams and possibilities—that was inspiring, something to yearn for. Lynx didn't want his whole life to be determined by his skills. He

wanted to choose for himself and work toward his own goals. He only had his one body to offer—and that was why he wanted to become big, strong, and proud like Dick.

So Lynx decided to hide his skill. He made someone who appeared to have similar abilities as him secretly use appraisal paper beforehand, and when his own abilities were appraised, he switched the papers.

Lynx learned the name of his skill and the usual life path of its possessors after he joined the Black Iron Freight Corps.

Lynx felt lucky to have escaped appraisal and come to the Corps.

Most of those with the shadowmaster skill collected intel—or assassinated others—under the cover of the night. Since he began polishing the shadowmaster skill after he joined the Black Iron Freight Corps, his skill was still shoddy. As far as making weapons from shadows, he'd taught himself. However, he was still inexperienced at letting the shadows cloak him, and it was easy for high-ranking adventurers and those with sharp senses to find him.

But Lynx didn't mind.

He wanted to be like Captain Dick—not lurking around to spill blood under the cover of darkness. He wanted to fight fair and square in bright places. That was his MO.

And he didn't want to hide his true self from the giggling girl before him.

"Professor Lynx, please use your shadowmaster skill to cut up this cake," Mariela prompted.

Lynx had fallen into thought when Mariela thrust a plate of cake at him.

"This is for looking after Emily," the owner of the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion had said, setting down the plate of cake he'd made specially for them. Since he'd made it in between serving customers, it wasn't a sponge cake, but a dome of thin crepes, sandwiching cream and thin slices of fruit. It was the kind of cake where the sweetness of the cream and the acidity of the fruit came together in perfect harmony in one bite, and the springy texture of the crepes was a delight to eat.

If this wonderful cake had one fault, it was that it would be difficult to cut. If Mariela used a knife, the pillowy crepes would gently swallow it, pushing the cream out and ruining the beautiful shape that the owner had taken great pains to layer.

Once it was inside your mouth, it would all be the same, but he'd gone to such trouble to make it. Plus, Mariela knew that the cake would be particularly divine if she could feast on it with her eyes, too.

"You said your shadow knives can 'intercept,' right? I bet they could cut up this difficult cake into perfect slices," Mariela proposed with a very serious expression indeed.

But hey, she'd remembered what he'd told her! Now, should he be amazed or exasperated by this unexpected practical use of his skills?

"...This's the first time I've been told to cut a cake with my skill."

Was Lynx exasperated or embarrassed? She couldn't guess from his smiley eyes, but he sliced the cake for her with an audible *shlip*.

"Wow! Amazing! It's perfect!" Mariela lauded with sparkling eyes, commenting on how she couldn't possibly eat it because it was so beautiful. And yet, she immediately snatched up a small plate to serve it.

He'd managed to slice it in near perfection, but she fumbled serving it. On her plate, the slice flopped over on its side, and her mouth gaped open in surprise.

"Classic Mariela," he said, unable to contain his laughter.

Guess Mariela can only see this shady weapon of mine as handy cookware, huh? Well, I guess even with alchemy, there are poisons and other dangerous potions...

Mariela had never broached the topic with him, but Lynx had happened to hear about potions in the imperial capital that killed people. He had no doubt that even if Mariela were asked to make one, she'd either tell an obvious lie, insisting she had no clue, or she would stand her ground and refuse to make it.

I guess any skill is what the user makes of it, huh...?

Of course, there were appropriate uses for each skill, but he had a vague idea

that no skill existed that could be used for only good deeds.

This eased the guilty conscience that had haunted him all his life for having an ability that wasn't exactly a good thing.

"Lynx, you have the biggest piece." It seemed she was able to transfer this serving to a plate without tipping it over. After all, it had a large enough base to support its weight. "See? I did it this time." Mariela giggled as she offered him the cake. She seemed no different from any other ordinary girl, and she must have viewed Lynx as a normal young man.

It put him at ease. Lynx was starting to think that it would be nice if he could come home to this one day. And once again, Lynx was acutely aware of the true nature of this feeling.



04



"I shouldn't be the one saying this—I mean, I tag-teamed you with Lynx and all—but are you sure it's all right to let them be alone together? I'm pretty sure Lynx isn't confessing to Mariela to light a fire under your ass, Sieg."

As Mariela and Lynx were enjoying their meal together, Sieg and Edgan were having a drink at Edgan's usual bar.

"I have time alone with Mariela every day," Sieg answered, gazing into his glass.

"Whaaat? Aren't you confident? You saying you won't lose to Lynx? Have you already gone that far with Mariela?"

Any chatter about love lives made Edgan's ears twitch. His ears actually were twitching. Literally.

"It's not like that."

That was right. Sieg gazed at his glass, musing about how he and Mariela didn't have that kind of relationship. It was closer to parent and child or brother

and sister. That was what Mariela had wanted, so Siegmund had stayed by her side as her guardian.

“Well, Lynx is closer to her age, y’know. And to her interests and values. Well, when it comes to food, I mean,” Edgan added. He kept glancing at Sieg, over and over. “Mariela’s a good girl. She’s a great cook—well, other than her original creations. I know Lynx’s type: clumsy, ordinary, naive.”

“Ugh...”

That hit Sieg where it hurt. He swung his drink back, hanging his head in a way that was beyond his years, even though he was in his mid-twenties.

“I envy Lynx...”

“Let it all out!” Edgan squealed, giddy to see Sieg hanging his head, even though Sieg had always comforted Edgan during his never-ending string of rejections. “The age difference really got you, huh? That’s got to be it. I mean, it’s so important. You can change everything except that! I knew it! That’s why Jennifer told me she couldn’t get with me!”

Somewhere along the way, he had abruptly changed course and started to talk about himself. With some sympathy for Sieg, the bar’s owner poured an expensive drink and handed it to him. “This one’s on Edgan.”

“Whaaat?! Since when did I say I was treating him? Hey, I never—”

“Shaddap. How about you toast to breaking it off with Jennifer or whatever? With your own money.”

“I’ll do that. Oh, this is the good stuff. I’m surprised you got it here in the Labyrinth City.”

“Aren’t you from the Black Iron Freight Corps who brought it here...?”

Incidentally, this place had no female employees. The seats were limited to the number the owner could serve by himself, and the bar itself was a hole in the wall. But it was known for its good drinks. Since the Black Iron Freight Corps were the ones who had supplied the alcohol, it was normal that Edgan would know about it. What was surprising was that he’d be a regular at this refined establishment.

The place was more empty than usual today. Only a single customer in a hood sat at a corner table, drinking quietly.

“And? What’ll you do, Sieg? When you get to A Rank and get free, I mean. Or you could give up on being free and stay as a slave by Mariela’s side?” Edgan continued his obstinate questions.

Sieg continued to drink with his head down. He couldn’t see Edgan’s eyes, but they weren’t glassy from the drinks. As a member of the Black Iron Freight Corps, he must have been trying to assess the escort of the girl under their protection. Well, no doubt there was an element of base curiosity in his questions, too.

“Nothing. Even if I become A Rank and earn my freedom, I’ll remain her escort.”

“What? Even if Lynx wins her over?”

“That’s right.”

“Why? After going to all the trouble to get free? And becoming A Rank, to boot? You could have it all: fame, fortune, women. You don’t need to take the high road. Life’s short, man. Let’s enjoy it.”

Sieg raised his head and looked at Edgan.

“Yes. And she saved mine.”

Sieg’s piercing blue eye seemed infinitely deep and honest.

There was no way to know the full extent of the emotion behind it.

Sieg was envious of Lynx.

Lynx was closer to Mariela in age than Sieg, and he was stronger.

And Sieg felt the sight of Mariela and Lynx together was more natural and fitting than him and Mariela. Sieg had always strived toward to make her desires reality, with her best interest in heart. But since she first met Lynx, the two of them had naturally hit it off and enjoyed talking to each other.

And he was jealous of that, too.

Even if he were freed from slavery, they were the things that he could never

have.

So what? Mariela had given him everything, even when he was on the verge of death. There was no way Sieg would ever forget that.

It wasn't just the uncurable wounds that she healed or the way she treated him with respect as a human being. It wasn't just that she'd handed him material possessions—a sword, protective gear, the stability of food, clothing, and shelter.

He'd realized something when he defeated a wyvern without his Spirit Eye.

She had saved the arrogant, foolish, and selfish human being known as Siegmund.

She had saved his life and redeemed his future.

It didn't matter if he was a slave or a free man. Even if he was jealous of Lynx, even if he longed for Mariela, Siegmund would continue to keep those feelings inside himself to serve her.

Although Sieg didn't form those thoughts into words, the frivolous smile slipped from Edgan's face, and the younger man gazed into his single blue eye as if weighing the emotions in his heart.

"I feel like I left myself wide-open for that one," Edgan finally said quietly, uncharacteristically serious.

"Well, no reason to look so down," Sieg said comfortingly, even though he should have been the one who needed to hear it most.

Why's Edgan the one bein' cheered up? Shouldn't it be the other way around? thought the bar owner, but of course, he was the only one who heard his question.

"Mariela's a tough nut to crack. She's clueless. I wonder how long the young Lynx can hold out."

"Hmm? What's this? Sieg, you're so confident! Did something happen between the two of you?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. I'm starting to think I could help Mariela into the bath, and she'd just coo 'That's the life.'"

“An in. You’re the caregiver, eh?”

“Sure am!”

Silence prevailed in the watering hole. Both Sieg and Edgan drank together without a peep. Drinking away one’s pain was an acquired taste for adults. Normally, the bar owner would stop them—“I think you’ve had enough”—but even he said, “I’ll be open until dawn tonight,” and lined up his best stuff on the shelf. All at Edgan’s expense, of course.

As if sensing the vibe of the bar, the man drinking alone at a corner table quietly stood up. He didn’t want to be a nuisance to the young men. When he left the establishment, a half-moon appeared in a break between the clouds.

From full to waning, from waxing to full. The moon’s form was as uncertain as the wandering hearts of youths.

Would that moon start to wax? Or would it start to wane?

Oh moon, grow full for the sake of their future...!

The spring breeze blew off the man’s hood, revealing a head as bright as a full moon.

“Snappy!”

Although no one was around to see it, the man flashed a thumbs-up, then disappeared to the next establishment.



05



With each new investigation of the volcanic fifty-sixth stratum, they seemed to be getting further from coming come up with a way to subjugate it.

Weishardt had hit a wall of unprecedented heights.

They’d prepared masks and protective clothing made from wyvern materials. They’d cooled the wide passage from the stairs to the open area and cleared away rocks to make it easier for troops to pass through.

But that was all that they'd managed to do.

Where they had found the "walking volcano" was a vast area; they couldn't cool the whole thing.

To make matters worse, when they emerged into the open space from the passage and at least tried to irrigate it, the dragon flew into the air and attacked them with its hot breath. Lava pools burbled out from the ground. Even if they managed to cool part of it with liberal use of regular and magical water, it would return to its normal temperature in no time. This endeavor was doomed from the start.

Nierenberg asked the alchemist if there was a potion that allowed activity in a high temperature environment. She'd answered that there was one that produced a thin membrane of ice to protect against heat called "Ice Spirit's Protection." And there was a type of polymorph medicine called "Demi-Dragon Medicine" that could transform one's body into something like a demi-dragon, who could thrive even in harsh environmental conditions. The problem was that Ice Spirit's Protection was a special-grade potion, meaning the alchemist couldn't make it. As for the Demi-Dragon Medicine, which was only high-grade, it required the scales of a red dragon. There was no question that the dragon in the fifty-sixth stratum was one, but if they could get close enough to obtain the scales, there wouldn't be much of a need for this medicine anymore. In other words, neither option was realistic.

They'd gotten in touch with the Black Iron Freight Corps, who'd just arrived in the imperial capital, to ask if they could obtain information on red dragon scales. But they knew S-Rank monster materials didn't just appear on the market; there was little hope of success.

The report from the scout unit that left Weishardt's office mere moments ago wasn't promising, either. The scorching air burned up all the insect summoner's insects, and the only information that the sonar users had been able to glean supported the results of the visual survey. There was only one new thing that they'd learned. The open area was where the red dragon searched for the enemy, and as soon as the Forces emerged from the staircase into the area to the walking volcano, the dragon would immediately go on the attack.

Was it displeased at the low temperature of the fifty-sixth stratum? Or was it irritated with the scuttling humans? In either case, the dragon faced the passage and breathed its fire into it to incinerate a dozen slaves and cause serious injuries to both scouts and combat engineers, according to reports. By serious injuries, they meant losses of limbs that couldn't be healed with high-grade potions.

Based on the damage, the red dragon must have been at the top of the monsters within the S Rank.

These six months have been going too well. Isn't it normal for casualties to occur during a Labyrinth operation? How many of our soldiers were eaten by the basilisk?

Weishardt wasn't convinced.

As expected. The only thing we can do is strive for S-or A-Rank soldiers, except...

He took out a document listing high-ranking adventurers in the imperial capital. It was confidential material that needed high security clearance to access. Even this top-secret document had the whereabouts of only one of the three S-Rank adventurers out there.

The Gold Lion General, Leonhardt Schutzenwald.

Weishardt's brother.

In terms of strength, he was as powerful as an A-Rank adventurer, but the Lion's Roar tipped him over the edge to an S-Rank, since his skill increased the abilities of his team.

One of the remaining two, the Isolated Hollow had vanished more than ten years ago and hadn't been heard from since. The other, the Sword Savant, apparently lived with disciples on a steep mountain at the northern edge of the imperial capital—either over a hundred years old by now, or dead.

It was obvious why an S-Ranker would disappear or stay in a secluded area where ordinary people couldn't enter. While the Labyrinth Suppression Forces were at a loss in the face of a red dragon, the Isolated Hollow could protect the Forces from its breath, and the Sword Savant could have brought the flying

dragon crashing to the earth—perhaps ending its life. There was no way that an individual with superhuman strength would be allowed to live in peace. The rich, the powerful, and the ambitious would try to win them over.

Even Leonhardt—a public figure, a member of the margrave’s family, the general of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces—had limited freedom because he was bound to the Labyrinth.

The Labyrinth City had very few people with A-Rank power: Weishardt of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, Dick of the Black Iron Freight Corps, guildmaster Haage the Limit Breaker of the Adventurers Guild, Lightning Empress Elsee...

Applying their strongest to this mission meant serious repercussions in the unlikely event that they failed. It wouldn’t just cause the mission to capture the Labyrinth to stagnate; it would affect the future of the Labyrinth City itself.

There had to be other ways to effectively attack the red dragon, but they came up with a plan for the Lightning Empress to hit the fire-breathing creature with a lightning attack. Would they really be able to down the beast...?

“Pardon me. I have requests from the Adventurers Guild and the Merchants Guild.”

An aide came to deliver official documents to Weishardt as he ruminated. The internal administration of the Labyrinth City was his job, too. He took the documents and quickly divided them into approved and rejected piles.

“Hmm? What’s this?”

“Is there something wrong with the document?” the aide asked. He had checked for imperfections in the documents beforehand to reduce the burden on Weishardt.

“No, the document is fine, but what in this world is this: ‘Regarding Limits on the Young Entering the Labyrinth’?”

“Yes. Recently, there have been high-quality medicines circulating in the City. It has been good for reducing casualties, but the number of children going into the Labyrinth seems to have increased. The goal is to take measures of some sort to prevent the unthinkable from happening.”

To children, the Labyrinth made a nice playground, and at the same time, it was a valuable source of income for orphans. He hadn't thought there would be harmful effects from high-quality medicines making the rounds, which had allowed adventurers to go into the Labyrinth with greater peace of mind than before.

"It appears that adventurers are bragging that they can escape from monsters by using the newest smoke bombs on the market, and children unfamiliar with the Labyrinth are believing them."

"And what's the source of these smoke bombs?"

"They appear to originate from the apothecary cosponsored by the young lady of the Aguinas household, but they're now obtainable from most apothecaries..... Erm, shall I order the suspension of sales?"

The Aguinases. Upon hearing this name, Weishardt pressed his temples as if he were trying to quell an intense headache.

There is no way I could order that...

Mariela's public classes and study groups on making medicine and smoke bombs had found great success. The quality of medicine had dramatically improved in a little under half a year. A variety of effective medicines utilizing her manufacturing methods had entered the market. Another contributing factor was that a great number of magical tools had been developed to aid in medicine manufacturing.

A large part of the initial stage of growth for new products was development. It was more profitable to find new niches than to compete on the same products. Salves, oral medications, and monster-affecting smoke bombs had quickly become indispensable for low-ranking adventurers now that they were highly effective. The consumption of those items increased, and the connection between quality goods and a handsome profit had been firmly established in the public consciousness.

In the Labyrinth City, the resident's understanding of medicine expanded quickly, which reduced deaths from childhood illnesses and diminished the horror of sickness and injury. Of course, there was no need to worry too much about these things. It was preferable for perceptions to be corrected based on

the actual situation. The problem was that young and inexperienced children were becoming numb to the horror of the Labyrinth. In the long term, this fear was the difference between life and death in the Labyrinth City. Although the death rate in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces had been decreasing recently, many people from the City had lost their lives in the Labyrinth. Even if they survived and returned, many sustained injuries that prevented them from ever entering its premises again.

I can't tell Carol to stop making medicine and smoke bombs...!

They didn't need to limit the access of the orphans who made their living from gathering in the Labyrinth, nor ban the medicine and smoke bombs created by Caroline and the chemists. What they needed was to provide the children—those who would bear the burden of subjugating the Labyrinth in the future—with proper knowledge and techniques. Above all, Weishardt didn't want to cause undue worry for Caroline, who took pleasure in helping everyone with her medicine. He wanted her to smile. Forever.

Even yesterday, she'd bashfully looked up at him and smiled.

"My, Lord Weis," she had said. "You're too kind! That's just the sort of thing that I...!" She had stopped herself there. How lovely her flushed cheeks and dewy eyes were!

No, that just an illusion from the dream incense...!

Leonhardt and his subordinates had been secretly providing him with some dream incense. He couldn't help himself from using it. But that water pipe could be dangerous. He really had to stop using it before he did something strange in front of the real Caroline.

These insignificant worries had increased, although there were ways to handle those. The solution for this problem was simpler than subjugating the red dragon.

"Establish a school for the common people. Make the basics of reading, writing, arithmetic, and combat mandatory for all. Establish a committee to conduct studies to halve injuries and deaths among young adventurers. I do not mind if it's not perfect at first. Press forward so that we may open a school in one month's time, even if only a provisional one."

Before, he wouldn't have had the budget. His hands would have been tied. Now that they could obtain potions at the same price as the average in the imperial capital, they had been able to acquire a consistent supply of not only basilisk leather, but expensive materials from the deep strata of the Labyrinth. He had a little more financial leeway than before. Even if a person didn't possess fighting skills, learning how to fight would allow them to defeat the equivalent of one goblin. Knowing the ecosystem and correct way to deal with each stratum would allow them to gather materials. Up to now, there had been a great number of citizens living in the Labyrinth City who had never been in the Labyrinth itself, but if those people went even to the shallow strata, they had the potential to accumulate more wealth.

Weishardt dealt with the remaining documents one at a time. Now he had a clearer vision for dealing with the problems surrounding the internal administration of the Labyrinth City—problems that had been plaguing him forever. But he hadn't found even a clue on how to defeat the red dragon.

That night, the pleasant gurgles of sleep talk could be heard from Weishardt's bedroom. His aides would have to keep more secrets than those regarding the Labyrinth and potions.



06



"Pallois! Elio! Mother's here! Your mother has come to get you!"

Elmera flew into Sunlight's Canopy looking absurdly happy.

"Palloiiis, Eliooo! Mmmm...!"

Two boys had been reading books and quietly playing in a corner of the shop with Emily and Sherry. Elmera embraced them and planted big kisses on their cheeks.

Mariela knew her true colors, so she wasn't particularly surprised. But Elmera was in a long navy-blue dress that showed no skin, and wearing gloves and

boots. With her hair bundled into a tight bun and glasses on her nose, she seemed positively uptight. Any stranger who saw her fawning over these boys would be shocked. In fact, one of the chemists drinking tea in the shop was currently spraying the beverage back into his cup. Gross. This marked the moment when they created a new rule in Sunlight's Canopy: "Wash your own cup."

The thirteen-year-old boy named Pallois screwed up his face in annoyance. "Mom, not in public."

The nine-year-old, Elio, smiled happily. "Mama!"

Elmera looked far more delighted than her two boys—embarrassed and elated. She was always working, leaving the care of her children to her husband, but her greatest wish was to become more motherly. She was *too* excited about "Pick Up Your Children Day." Even at work, she'd been fidget-fidget-fidgeting. It had gotten to the point that Vice Chairman Leandro, who was always making other people do work, told her he and the others would take care of the rest so she could go.

Well, it *was* Leandro, so he probably foisted all her work onto someone with less authority.

"Mariela, thank you for watching my children. If you'd like, please share this with everyone."

After embracing her children for a while, Elmera handed Mariela a large bundle.

To clarify: Sunlight's Canopy had *not* begun offering daycare services, too. But both parents were working today, so the children had been put in Mariela's care. Emily and Sherry were at Sunlight's Canopy, too, and all the regulars were fond of children. Playing in the corner of a shop, the children weren't much of a nuisance; they entertained the peskier customers, so they even were helpful in a way.

"I caught these while I was working today," she explained. She was describing a bundle of blast lobsters like she'd picked up some weeds on the side of the road.

These lobsters were so big that they needed to be held with both hands. As the “blast” part of their name implied, they could unleash attacks from their pincers that were as powerful as a stone thrown by an adult human. If you avoided the attack and got close enough to catch them, these reckless creatures would self-destruct in a suicide mission. It was said their ability to kill predators left the environment safer for their offspring, and this was why they’d been able to survive among so many strong monsters.

This all made catching the lobsters excruciatingly difficult, but their flavor was exquisite. There were about twenty of them in the bundle.

Gulp. Mariela swallowed. She seemed much younger than she was, gulping audibly while ogling the food. But it was important to understand that she’d never seen a blast lobster before. They were very rare—not even available in the wholesale market. That was the Lightning Empress for you. To think she caught them with ease.

“I’ll make king-size fried lobsters. I’ll deep-fry them whole... You’ll all eat some, right?”

Pallois’s and Elio’s faces almost glowed in delight at Mariela’s suggestion. Amber and the Nierenbergs looked like they had no objections. Emily was already drooling.

“Well, I did catch them to thank you. Are you sure it’s all right...?” Elmera placed her forefinger on her chin in thought, and Mariela offered a proposal.

“Your husband isn’t back yet. How about you cook some together with Pallois and Elio for him?”

So now it had become “Cook with Your Children Day.” And “Express Gratitude to Your Father Day.” It was impossible for Elmera to not be on board with this plan. Emily and Sherry wanted to give some to *their* fathers, too. After the customers left and the shop was closed for the day, Mariela, Elmera, and the two boys began to make giant fried lobsters.

“Um, Mr. Lobster’s leg is moving...”

“Oh, you gave it a bit of an electric shock. It’s not alive. Don’t worry, Elio,” consoled Pallois.

Elmera's blood must have run strong through the younger brother, Elio, as he appeared to possess some kind of lightning skill. It seemed he didn't have much control over his own power—probably because he was young—which Mariela had deduced from his rubber clothes resembling a raincoat. As if he were afraid of hurting people with a lightning attack, he always hid behind his older brother and was reserved around Emily and Sherry. Pallois often looked after him; Elio's lightning attacks must not have been a big deal to him. What a nice brother.

"If you tear off the shell at the third joint on its back, you can easily peel off the rest. See?"

"Sherry, you're amazing!" Emily exclaimed.

Sherry must have possessed the dissection skill. She peeled the shells from the blast lobsters with artful finesse.

In the Labyrinth City, food wasn't divided up into consumable portions, particularly in the wholesale market. If there was a bird that was large enough to feed an entire family, it would be sold whole. Even big game was sold in enormous lumps with the bones intact. Since each household had to prepare its own food, it was said that women with dissection skills had no trouble finding husbands.

That's Sherry.

As Mariela removed the guts from the peeled blast lobsters and left incisions in the lean muscle meat, she trembled at Sherry's maidenly prowess. Incidentally, Elmera, who normally never cooked at all, giggled in delight as she watched her children's efforts and vigorously crushed inordinate amounts of dry bread into crumbs. Amber was acting rather devious as she brought out the bread; she must have intended to use this opportunity to stock up for the future.

"Eek!"

"I—I... I'm sorry..."

Sherry had reached out to help Elio, who was having trouble peeling the blast lobster shells. When their hands touched, he had apparently zapped her.

"It's okay! I was just startled, that's all." Sherry comforted him, but Elio's large

eyes filled with tears.

“I’m...sorry. I...I don’t want you to hate me...”

He’d probably lost friends from this static electricity zinging those around him at the slightest touch. Sherry looked at the boy who seemed like he would start crying at any minute.

“...How cute...” She gazed upon him like Nierenberg looked at his patients. It made Elio’s cheeks flush red.

...Sherry certainly is Dr. Nierenberg’s daughter...

At that moment, Mariela became convinced Sherry and Nierenberg had something in common aside from their black hair.

Despite a few unexpected incidents, Elio added flour, eggs, and bread crumbs to the lobsters. His hands seemed to be covered in these ingredients, ready to be deep-fried themselves. Meanwhile, Sherry made soup, and Elmera completed her mass production of bread crumbs, then finely chopped leafy greens in midair with a vigorous *bzz-zz-zz-zz* sound. Right when Amber finished arranging the salad, the king-size fried lobsters, featuring whole blast lobsters, was done.

They decided to cook pilaf, too, since most of the bread had been ground into crumbs. It was placed into a large bowl. The A-Rank-adventurer-turned-food-processor was astonishingly convenient. The chopping was done instantly, making the whole affair take a short amount of time.

As if timing it to coincide with dinner, Elmera’s husband made his appearance at Sunlight’s Canopy. He looked like a very kind man who was a good fit for Elmera, and they matched right down to their glasses. For some reason, Ghark was with him. Just when Mariela was about to ask what was wrong, Elmera spoke up in delight.

“Darling! Grandpappy! Welcome! Grandpappy, let’s have dinner together. The children helped us make it!”

What a shock. Well, it seemed obvious in retrospect. Elmera *did* look like Ghark’s granddaughter. Did she get her enthusiasm for medicinal herbs from him?

““Grandpappy’?!”

“...Shaddap. And El, quit callin’ me that.” Ghark stared fixedly at Mariela, who looked like she might burst out laughing. He was about to return to his own store when a pair of children leaped on him.

“Grandpa!”

“Paw-paw!”

“Jeez! Pallois! Elio! Elio, don’t hug me with those hands o’ yers.”

Amid the excitement, Sieg, Lynx, and Edgan returned to Sunlight’s Canopy, and it turned into a chaotic dinner.

They sank their teeth into the huge fried lobsters. Well, at least Lynx and Edgan did, befitting a pair of young men, while Sieg cut his into bite-size pieces and ate with grace.

The blast lobster had a rich, meaty taste, but when it was fried, the muscles tightened up, making it tough. By cutting into the muscles according to the recipe, it became chewy enough to loosen and melt in your mouth, allowing you to fully savor the flavor enriched by the coating. The blast lobster was delicious. Unthinkably delicious. Except for one thing...

“This man is *always* saying how bored he is when I’m not around.”

“That’s because you’re always so electrifying, my dear.”

Flirt. Flirt. Flirt. Flirt.

What the heck? I haven’t even eaten half yet, and I already have heartburn...

The Seele couple had begun shamelessly flirting in public.

“Here, darling. Open wide.”

“You’ve got sauce on your face. *Slurp!*”

Mariela kept chewing and chewing her lobster, awkwardly searching for a place to look. Lynx ate even faster than usual. He was already plunging into his third helping.

Sieg kept glancing at Mariela’s mouth to see whether there was any sauce, but on this occasion, she was eating very politely. There was none. He dabbed

some sauce on his own mouth as a last resort, which everyone ignored.

As for Edgan, he had crunched up the lobster tail, which was too hard and almost inedible. The inside of his mouth had to be bloody.

“Blasted lobsters! Blast!” he kept muttering. It was starting to get a little scary.

“Miss Mariela is a brilliant chemist.” Elmera was introducing Mariela to her husband, Voyd, but the couple was too much in their own world for it to stick.

Their two sons must have been used to this, because the children were the only ones who were excited.

“Edgan uses dual swords; Lynx uses short swords; Sieg uses a one-handed sword. They said they’ve been hunting cyclops in the thirty-eighth stratum.”

Voyd nodded along with Elmera’s explanation, but he briefly stopped her when she mentioned Sieg.

“Hmm? One-handed sword, huh? He strikes me as an archer, but...,” he muttered.

How did he know? Sieg stiffened at the sudden observation.

“Well, I used to be an adventurer in the past. I can guess someone’s weapon from their movements, their muscle mass, and the air around them. That’s my specialty,” Voyd answered with a smile to dispel the awkwardness. “The muscle mass on your left and right arm is different. Of course, that could be an indication of a one-handed sword user, too, but your build is specific to an archer.”

“I lost my dominant eye, so I changed to swords,” Sieg explained before Voyd could elaborate further.

“Hmm? But isn’t it still possible to aim with one eye? You’d have a hard time changing your dominant eye, but if it’s a weapon you were accustomed to using, you’ll still have muscle memory. I wonder if that would be easier for you than starting over with swordsmanship.”

Guessing what Voyd was insinuating, Sieg made no reply and averted his eyes.

“Ah, here I am, prying into the affairs of a high-ranking adventurer. If I’ve

caused offense, I apologize.” With that, Voyd returned to his frivolous conversation with Elmera.

That night, Sieg took out the practice bow and arrows he’d previously stowed away and gazed at them in his room alone.

He understood what Voyd wanted to tell him: “It’s not that you can’t use a bow, it’s that you won’t.”

I don’t want to remember anything from that time...

He didn’t want to remember the way he’d depended on the powerful divine protection of the Spirit Eye. He hadn’t known how to use any weapon besides a bow, nor how to strengthen his body and weapon with magic. The idea of bowing his head to someone and asking for instruction was intolerable to him. Even though he hadn’t studied under anyone, the bow and arrows meant for hunting animals had been sufficient to defeat monsters.

“Don’t challenge monsters with an ordinary weapon,” people would tell him.

He’d been pleased every time someone told him this, taking it to mean his own talents were superior.

But now he understood. They were warning him to have the right weapon and armor for the monsters he faced.

All his money had practically vanished as soon as he got it. Instead of quality weapons or armor, he had bought things that weren’t useful in battle—fashionable clothes and shoes. He had sunk money into overpriced alcohol and food. He had enjoyed showing off. As someone chosen by the Spirit Eye, as someone with superior skills, he didn’t want to look like a person from a remote village near the Fell Forest or like a bumpkin. Whenever he learned of recent trends, he freely poured his money into them.

He didn’t want to remember what had happened after he lost his Spirit Eye, either.

If he could just complete the required number of quests, he would reach A Rank. That was what he thought, but it was doubtful whether he was even C Rank without his Spirit Eye. He hadn’t wanted to admit he was weaker than the comrades he’d once tyrannized, drunk on his own power.

He'd been convinced that he couldn't use a bow without his Spirit Eye.

But now...

Sieg placed the bow and arrows back on the shelf again and raised his mythril sword, still in its sheath.

Now he could use strengthening abilities. He could even pour magical power into his weapon. His physical abilities were better now than they were back then. Even if he didn't use a bow, they would get him to A Rank.

Even without a Spirit Eye, he'd surpassed his former self. That foolish, useless version of himself no longer existed. So what if he couldn't use a bow?

That day, Sieg went to sleep without looking at his reflection in his sword and without removing his sword from its sheath.

Because if he looked at his reflection in the sword now, he would surely notice something.

Looking back at him would be his regret, his avoidance, and the weak will that remained in him even now.



07



He'd thought the sky was blue.

There was no fog, exactly, just thin clouds hanging white and low as far as the eye could see. Although he had decent visibility around him, the distant mountains appeared hazy.

The springtime haze appeared to be a mirage. It was as though he'd never reach it, even if he spurred his horse.

It made him feel like someone was telling him: "You can't go anywhere. You can't escape the Labyrinth."

As he gazed up at the hazy spring sky, Leonhardt couldn't shake that feeling. He'd always been confined to the Labyrinth. Looking at the sky wasn't

something he ever did.

Leonhardt held in his hand a letter delivered by the Black Iron Freight Corps. It was a private message from his son, though the child had nothing in particular to keep secret. He had addressed this letter to his father to thank him for the sword he'd sent as a birthday present, and to say he wanted to hurry and come to the Labyrinth City so he could defeat the Labyrinth with his father. Leonhardt thought about his son, whom he hadn't seen in a long time.

In appearance, his son was a carbon copy of the young Leonhardt, but his Lion's Roar hadn't manifested in him. It was a rare skill, possessed by neither his father nor his grandfather, so it was no wonder it hadn't appeared in his son. That said, future generations could still inherit it, which was why it had been decided that Leonhardt's son would succeed him as Margrave Schutzenwald after he retired. And that meant he would take over the subjugation of the Labyrinth, too.

To Leonhardt, that seemed cruel.

With or without Lion's Roar, his son wasn't suited for battle.

This didn't mean he was weak. He possessed the same excellent physical abilities and knack for magic as Leonhardt did. Currently, he was far away from the Labyrinth City, studying and training under the guidance of Leonhardt's father. If everything went well, he would reach the equivalent of an A Rank when it came to strength. But based on the reports that Leonhardt received at regular intervals, he suspected his son's true abilities manifested in internal administration. Leonhardt regretted that; he would be a fine lord if only the Labyrinth didn't exist.

In the house of Margrave Schutzenwald, protecting the people's way of life, serving the Empire as retainers of the emperor, and destroying the Labyrinth all meant the same thing. These were their duties. In particular, Leonhardt was born with Lion's Roar and received specialized training from a young age to destroy the Labyrinth. He'd given no thought to it whatsoever. He was raised to believe it was a matter of course.

He'd felt that marrying the woman he'd been engaged to since infancy and passing on his bloodline were part of the duties he'd been charged with. It was

all part of his work.

Until he held his son in his arms.

He had been a soft creature, completely powerless. The top of his head was plush with supple skin. His neck couldn't even hold his head upright. This was beyond Leonhardt's understanding. He had a strange fear of this weak little thing; when the baby was placed in his arms, he couldn't move a muscle. Without the power of speech, the baby immediately burst into tears. Although he was given precious milk, he spit up a little when he was burped. As for the bit that he kept down, he excreted it at an astonishing speed. Well, even adults sometimes rushed to the toilet and threw up when they drank too much, so it wasn't as if he couldn't understand that.

But his son was horribly warm.

Leonhardt sensed tremendous energy and possibility in the scorching body he could feel through the baby's clothes.

Incredible, he thought. That was it. This was life. Leonhardt felt the energy to live burning in this tiny body.

He had a sudden urge to leave a better world behind for his newborn child.

And this passion remained in Leonhardt's core to this very day.

"With my own two hands, I will conquer the Labyrinth..."

Leonhardt had almost tacked on, "If my wish is granted." He briefly closed his eyes, not knowing what to do with these weak feelings.

"I will make it come true," he muttered, clenching his fists.

The hazy spring sky was white in all directions, and he couldn't see what lay ahead.

The only thing he could see clearly was the landscape that appeared close enough to walk on.

But I must not stop.

Leonhardt approved Weishardt's draft of the battle plan and signed the papers.

“Limit Breaker and Lightning Empress. Thank you for coming. We’re grateful for your support.” Leonhardt shook hands with Haage, the Limit Breaker and Adventurers Guild guildmaster, and Lightning Empress Elsee, also known as Elmera, chairwoman of the Medicinal Herbs Division in the Merchants Guild.

They’d both come in response to the summons of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces.

Including Dick, who’d arrived earlier, the three collaborators gathered in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces’ council room. In the end, they had been unable to devise any other plan than using the strongest A-and S-Rankers in the Labyrinth City.

Leonhardt’s Lion’s Roar had conditions for its activation. It couldn’t strengthen those with the same or higher rank as him. Leonhardt was registered as S Rank, which could be attributed to his Lion’s Roar. Alone, he would have the strength of an A-Rank adventurer.

Their target for this operation was the guardian of the walking volcano, the red dragon. With the nine A-Rankers, Leonhardt would venture into the unfavorable volcanic terrain and fight the flying monster, an S-Rank, with his own unaided strength.

Nierenberg and his medical team were on standby in the safe zone near the stairs. They had all sorts of high-grade potions at their disposal. But if someone were injured, would it be possible for Nierenberg to slip through the red dragon’s attacks to save them?

The chances of success were low, and the odds were even lower that no one would die. Nevertheless, they’d all gathered here.

“I trained those guys at the guild so they could run the place on their own,” Haage said.

“I want a city where my family can have a peaceful life,” added Elmera.

Dick nodded in silence.

“Well then, here’s the intelligence we’ve gathered on the red dragon and the Labyrinth. This is our strategy.”

Weishardt spread out the documents, and the strategy meeting began.

The battle with the red dragon would be the day after tomorrow.

The A-Rankers would spend tomorrow as if it were another ordinary day. On the morning of the battle, they planned to tell their families that they were going to the Labyrinth for their usual work.

They hadn't been ordered *not* to reveal their mission.

In a city with a labyrinth, battle was a livelihood. Experiencing the worst-case scenario was a part of life in the Labyrinth City.

Tomorrow, they would prepare for battle with a special appreciation for the lives they had.

The top brass of the guild had grown. Haage felt they'd already graduated. If something were to happen to him... An image of his enraged wife came to his mind, and he smiled.

Elmera pictured her husband and children. She wanted to be with them forever, but more than that, she was resolute in her work as the Lightning Empress to lay the groundwork for a future free from the Labyrinth.

Dick was glad he'd been able to set Amber free. She'd settled in working at Sunlight's Canopy in no time, and it was possible for her to make a living even by herself. Although he did nothing but stare down at his chest armor, in his mind's eye was her smile.

With these respective thoughts in their hearts, the warriors returned to what might well be the last day of their precious lives.



08



Can't sleep.

The Black Iron Freight Corps had returned to the Labyrinth City from their trip to the imperial capital the night before last.

Jay had been with the transport group. He'd had only a little work to do yesterday, which consisted of cleaning the raptors' pen. Afterward, he'd been given the rest of the day off and gone to sleep. Today, he'd skipped out on his work and napped all day, and after wolfing down his fill of food, he couldn't fall asleep.

His dinner was full of salt, which made it delicious. But afterward, he was thirsty. Jay crawled out of bed to get some water. He could hear voices coming from a large room in the base, suggesting the members of the Black Iron Freight Corps had gathered there.

"Hey, Captain. If Sieg reaches A Rank, you'll be his sponsor for his release from slavery, right?"

"Sieg? Oh, him. I don't mind, but A Rank? I can't believe someone who was so close to death could make it this far."

Haage had suggested he would be Sieg's sponsor, even though no one had asked him. The conversation at the base continued with idle talk of little value—skepticism that the guildmaster wanted to bring Sieg onto Team Haage, or that the Corps would take Sieg somewhere to celebrate after he fulfilled the conditions for A Rank.

None of that really concerned Jay.

Release from slavery? Sieg? Close to dyin'? His mind took the gossip and ran with it.

What? What are they talkin' about? Sieg? I know that name. It's that guy. The one missin' an eye who's always with that little punk and the girl. The guy with the good weapon. He's a slave? He almost died?

His thoughts rang inside his head. And then he remembered.

—Now, Siegmund! Submit from your very soul!

The Contract of Servitude ritual that he'd witnessed in the rear yard of Reymond's slave trading company during a break from taking care of the raptors.

Ah! Ah! Ah! Ooooh! It's him! That guy! It was him. I thought he croaked. No, I

was sure he croaked. He's the one Reymond bought! To use as an example! He shouldn't be alive. He was so weak that healin' magic wouldn't've worked! No one would care if he kicked the bucket! So why, why...? Ah! It's the alchemist, huh?! The alchemist is in this city! Yeah... Yeah! It's her! It's that girl who bought him!!!

Jay wasn't a particularly clever man. He didn't possess the logical capacity to fully consider an idea. If he were clever, he probably wouldn't draw conclusions from putting together fragmentary information that he was only barely familiar with.

But it was precisely because of his stupidity and simplicity that he reached an irrational conclusion: that Mariela was the alchemist.

A conclusion that happened to be the truth.

If that girl had chosen me instead of that dyin' bastard, his weapon and his lot in life would all be mine...

Jay was consumed by envy, hatred, jealousy.

His resentment knew no end. It was easy for him to direct his anger at another weaker person as the cause of his misfortune.

It's all... It's all 'cause that girl didn't pick me...!!!

The spring sky darkened, and the smell of rain drifted from the clouds hanging heavy over everything.

CHAPTER 5

Lynx





01



The rain was pouring outside, but the weather had no effect inside the Labyrinth.

No rain fell here in the twenty-third stratum, the Shores of Eternal Night, to fill its many various lakes and streams weaving their way among the trees and lunamagia.

Clear water burbled on its path between the boulders, outlining each rock. Was the falling rain in the Labyrinth City the source of these waters? Mariela gathered lunamagia soaked in moonstone light, careful not to slip on moss and fall into the stream. With algae covering the surface of the water, she couldn't even guess the depth of these pools.

"Sorry for taking you away from your busy schedule," Mariela said sheepishly.

"Don't worry about it."

"Mariela, protecting you is my highest priority."

Lynx and Sieg waved their hands to reassure her it was nothing to worry about.

After the Aguinas family scandal, orders for high-grade potions had decreased for a little while, but Mariela kept churning out new potions with each passing day, as if this was no problem.

"At present, I don't see any reason to believe that she'll suddenly perish from the Magic Circle of Suspended Animation," reported Nierenberg. That was enough for the Forces to resume their purchases of one hundred potions a day.

They were in a stratum that the Labyrinth Suppression Forces had already captured. By subjugating monsters in those parts, they could weaken the power of the Labyrinth itself. Those soldiers who couldn't participate in the operation in the deepest part of the Labyrinth went into strata suited to their individual

abilities, working hard to subjugate monsters. Naturally, this consumed potions. When high-grade potion orders were curbed, the Forces' potion reserves neither increased nor decreased.

The remaining potion vials in the Labyrinth City numbered hardly more than five thousand. Seeing that it was impossible to collect empty vials when a life was on the line, it was inevitable that their numbers decreased from year to year. Over the past six months, many of those empty vials had been refilled with potions, meaning few were left.

The Aguinas household's underground potion storage facility had recently resumed operations, allowing them to bring in barrels of high-grade potions to transfer into the facilities' giant tanks.

Incidentally, the barrels used for transport were made of wood with the capacity to hold one hundred vials' worth of potions. They were inscribed with Magic Circles of Antidegradation, just like potion vials, but the effect only lasted for a few days. The engraved magic circles disappeared with the passage of time. Take too long, and branches and roots would start to sprout from the barrels, perhaps due to the miraculous recovery effects of the potions.

The Aguinas family was put in charge of managing potions once again—but that was it. The Labyrinth Suppression Forces had the ownership rights. Since the Forces supplied the magical gems necessary to operate the storage facilities, it was more accurate to say the Aguinases were lending out their place.

The only people on the Aguinas side with knowledge of this situation were Caroline's father, Royce, and his elderly steward. They were bound by powerful oath magic, including the promise not to pry into the source of the potions. After Caroline married and became the head of the Aguinas family, she would inherit the secret and the oath. At the very least, Royce didn't want to burden her with needless responsibilities until then.

Of course, Mariela was unaware of these circumstances. It wasn't mandatory for her to supply one hundred high-grade potions each day. She had been told to make potions "in moderation," which must have been because they were scared of something happening to the sole alchemist in the City. And yet,

Mariela succeeded in making a hundred potions a day—not even all in a single go, but she crafted them one at a time. Since Amber and the Nierenbergs were permanent fixtures at Sunlight’s Canopy, she used her free time to do the same work, many times over.

It wasn’t for money. She had already received compensation beyond her wildest dreams, beyond what she could count.

She had a hunch that in a short while, she would be able to make high-grade potions without using any tools at all.

To open her Library, she needed to make potions without tools using only alchemical skills. If she became able to make special-grade potions, she might even be able to restore Sieg’s eye. There would be nothing better as a congratulatory gift when he achieved A Rank and earned his freedom.

Although it took time and magical power, she made high-grade potions one by one with reckless abandon.

The only downside was that she’d caused shortages of lunamagia in the Labyrinth City from churning out ten thousand high-grade potions. Since the herb wasn’t profitable to ship to the imperial capital, significant amounts of lunamagia had never circulated the markets in the Labyrinth City. That was why she’d come with Lynx and Sieg to gather it last time, but what they’d gathered from that trip had already been used up.

She’d requested Malraux to scrape some together for her, but the next delivery wouldn’t be for another three days, and she was getting bored. When she’d asked Lynx and Sieg to help her, they’d told her yes, even though they were taking a break from subjugation.

She had made a point to let them know she’d pay a retaining fee.

“There are materials from lizardmen down there. Well, fine. I guess you can treat me to dinner,” Lynx had generously replied.

The Black Iron Freight Corps had just returned to the Labyrinth City, so the little group could even bring a raptor along to carry loads again.

Mariela was about to express her thanks to Jay—who was hauling their stuff—but his blue eyes were murky, like festering water in a ditch. He scrutinized

her with those eyes, and she was unable to say anything.

This person...must be the one taking care of the raptors at Reymond's slave trading company when I met Sieg for the first time, right?

Up to now, he'd always turned away when she spoke to him, but today he'd been throwing insolent glances her way. Mariela remembered how he'd been in the same place as Sieg during their first encounter. For some reason, he watched her every move like a hawk. She couldn't even hand Sieg or Lynx any of the potions she'd brought with her.

Sieg's eye was beautiful, inspiring a certain nostalgia when she gazed into it, but she couldn't bring herself to look into Jay's eyes. Though they never had really crossed paths, she could feel the extreme resentment welling behind his eyes. Mariela inched away from him and began leading the raptor to where lunamagia grew in abundance.

Although Jay watched Mariela with a rude stare, he made no move to do anything. He didn't even try to approach her. He knew who she was and what would happen to him if he ever laid a finger on her.

"Jay—over here," Lynx called out.

As with the last time that they were down here, Jay sluggishly picked up magical stones and pelts dropped by the lizardmen. A short distance away, Mariela gathered lunamagia, dried it, and loaded it onto the raptor's back.

"Grar," the raptor whined. *More water, please?*

Mariela replied, "Just a little" and cupped her hands into a bowl to offer some water.

Even though there was water everywhere in this stratum, the raptor seemed to prefer Mariela's magic-infused variety. Magical power changed the flavor of the water, but this was undetectable to the human palate.

The Corps kept this raptor as a mode of transportation within the Labyrinth City, and it relaxed under the sacred tree at Sunlight's Canopy whenever Lynx had brought it with him. It was very fond of Mariela, which must have been because she always gave it water infused with magical power.

The burbling of the flowing water and the rumbling sound of a waterfall were audible from far away.

Sometimes a lizardman would let out a death cry when Lynx or Sieg defeated it, but there were no other sounds.

The air must have cooled down. The last time that they had come to this stratum, it had felt warm compared to the outside, but now that spring had arrived, the stratum was the cooler terrain.

I'm getting cold. I think I'll gather a little more, and then we'll go home. Mariela rubbed her numbed hands together and resumed gathering.

And then, she noticed something. It was quiet.

She could no longer hear the voices of lizardmen.

Mariela was about to call out for Sieg and Lynx.

That was when the water of a nearby stream seemed to rise up, and something appeared.



02



“Shall we?” Leonhardt addressed the assembled adventurers and the Labyrinth Suppression Forces’ elite.

It was a little while after Mariela and the others had started gathering lunamagia in the twenty-third stratum.

Those with equipment weak to heat had swapped it out for basilisk leather. However, many of those here wore familiar expensive equipment. The only additional gear they had were the masks filtered with wyvern lungs, which made them look strange.

The plan was for Weishardt to protect everyone from the scorching heat with ice magic, and an A-Rank shield knight from the Labyrinth Suppression Forces would serve exclusively as his support.

The volcano walked slowly. If they plunged into the stratum while it was far away, they should be able to fight the red dragon that had swooped at them before. The strategy was to alleviate the disadvantageous lava zone with ice magic as they challenged the dragon. Once Leonhardt confirmed the volcano had moved far enough away, he gave the signal to charge.

“Ice Field.” Weishardt cast a weak ice spell on everyone.

This magic was often intended to envelop targets in cold air, slowly freezing them in place. But now he used it to protect the soldiers from the blistering land. Of course, he had to continuously keep it on a total of ten people who were moving around at high speed, so Weishardt had no leeway to participate in the offensive.

“Rrrrrrooar!”

As if to trample the worms who’d dared to invade its territory, the red dragon soared out of the volcano’s crater and flew at them with terrifying power.

One characteristic of the dragon species was that there were significant individual differences.

Whether it was for humans, animals, or monsters, there was an individual difference that existed in all creatures—be it body size or color. But they all fell within range: They were restricted in size and a certain color palettes. In particular, the dragons varied in shape, size, and abilities. They could appear to be different species all together. The only reason they were all lumped together under the dragon category was because there were so few of them. Even their ability for combat oscillated wildly.

The red dragon was a “dragon” by virtue of its two wings. That said, it couldn’t be compared to wyverns based on the sheer immensity of its size. After all, wyverns were a little bigger than horses, but the red dragon was colossal enough to swallow them in one gulp. Its skin was red and brown—like hot lava—and at a glance, its scales appeared dense and strong. It had the weight to match, too. Its wingspan was wider than its body was long. There was a thin membrane that stretched over the wings to catch the wind. Even though the wings weren’t small, it seemed inconceivable for them to be able to carry its weight. Plus, it didn’t even flap its wings once. The dragon had to be the type

that used magic and aerodynamics together to fly.

There were some dragon species that had been alive for a millennium, but this red dragon wasn't even two hundred years old. In a sense, it was young. But it had managed to grow to a great size in a short period of time. This might have been the work of the magical power that filled the Labyrinth.

"Gh."

The strength of their foe finally sank in now that they were challenging it. One of the soldiers let out a little squawk at the immensity of the creature. But no one could afford to be paralyzed in fear.

As the dragon streaked by overhead with a blast of fiery breath, Dick faced the dragon and launched one of the many spears he carried on his back. It wasn't his favorite black spear; this one was made of mythril, forged specially for this battle.

"Rising Dragon Spear."

"Wind Storm."

As Dick shot his spear with his skill, Leonhardt reinforced it with his magic, while someone else added their wind spell. The mithril spear had a high affinity with magic, and the spell swirled into a tornado around it. Those who came in contact with this attack would be shredded to pieces by the wind blades before the spear could ever reach them.

But even this couldn't withstand the red dragon's breath.

It was fired at a trajectory slightly off from the dragon's scorching breath, causing the creature to direct its attack away from the Forces. The mythril spear melted from the heat.

Tremors from the earth rumbled and shook the fifty-sixth stratum, and a hot wind blasted through it.

Without changing its altitude, the red dragon made a surprisingly tight, agile turn for its enormous body. It expelled its breath two or three more times, but all of the attacks were averted by Dick's spears.

It wasn't just weapons that had a certain range—magic operated in the same

way, too. The red dragon didn't move within that range. Dick's spears didn't directly hit its breath, but there was no attack that could reach the dragon, the spears included.

"We've come all this way just for you. Why not come down here? Don't be shy!"

All Haage and the warriors of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces could do was strike their sword sheaths with their shields, clanging them to try to provoke the dragon.

"You're just using an out-of-date strategy, aren't you? That's something straight out of a picture book."

Haage had gasped at first at the sight of the formidable foe, but all the red dragon did was circle overhead and breathe fire at them. The breath didn't even hit anyone due to Dick's spears, charged with wind magic from Leonhardt and the magic users that diverted its trajectory. Weishardt's ice magic protected them from being injured by the lava.

Haage's work would begin after the dragon alighted on the ground. With his two other warriors, he was as bored as he'd ever been. They worked hard to provoke the beast instead.

"That reminds me, when I was a young'un, my grammie read me a story about a warrior who made noise with his shield to provoke a dragon."

It was inevitable that Haage would start to recount a folktale in his carefree manner.

It was unclear if the dragon could understand human language, but of course, they were under too much stress to provoke it with insults anyway: "Hey, asshole! Yo mama is so massive, she's like a volcano! *And* she's got stubby legs!"

No one knew whether it realized they were provoking it, whether it saw an opening within Haage's group, or whether it had a habit of collecting shiny objects, but after blowing its breath once more, the red dragon began a nosedive toward Haage.

With its sizable wings, the dragon was colossal. Did it plan to make a single

strike and rise back into the sky again? Or did it intent to alight on the ground and fight there? It seemed as though the wind pressure created by the huge creature's approach would be enough to blow the soldiers off their feet. As if to make sure that didn't happen to him, Haage unsheathed his spare long sword and drove it halfway into the ground.

This action was a signal, and Haage and the warriors all leaped back as one.

Did the red dragon notice that Haage's shout had thoroughly ensnared it in a trap?

"Lightning Empress! Take it down!"

"Heavenbolt!"

Ever since they'd alighted onto this stratum, Lightning Empress Elsee had been chanting at the back of the group to escape the dragon's notice. As soon as it entered her range, her mighty spell, *Heavenbolt*, pierced the creature's body.



03



"Hello. Elio, say hi," prompted Pallois.

"H-hello."

"Oh, what cute customers. Running errands in the rain?" called out Merle of Merle's Spices.

Elmera's sons had come to Sunlight's Canopy.

In response, Elio shyly hid behind his older brother Pallois. They must not have totally mastered the use of umbrellas yet, because Elio was particularly drenched.

"Welcome," Sherry said, taking notice of them. "Would you like to read a book together again?"

Elio happily nodded, running over to the corner of the shop to join her.

“Elio said he wanted to come play,” Pallois said in a slight whisper as if to apologize for coming to the shop without buying anything. He had an unusual amount of social awareness for a boy in the Labyrinth City.

“You can come anytime you like. After all, I always come visit for no reason in particular! Hey, before you go play, Dehydrate! And here’s some candy, too.”

Merle was well acquainted with Sunlight’s Canopy and prepared tea and sweets for the timid boy. This was an all too familiar sight.

“Your dad isn’t with you today?” asked Sherry.

“Yeah, Father said he had urgent work to do,” Elio replied.

“So did my papa. Miss Mariela and Mr. Sieg are out, too.”

While drinking the tea Merle had prepared, Pallois explained that Elio had whined about wanting to come play with Sherry, who had been so kind after he’d accidentally zapped her with static electricity. He was used to people running away instead.

Pallois was too innocent to notice the eyes of those eavesdropping on the conversation—Merle, Amber, and Caroline—which glittered brightly at the signs of bittersweet love coming from Sherry and Elio.

The sight of the children flipped a switch in Merle, and she shared a piece of gossip with Amber. “That reminds me—I hear Lynx recently took our little Mariela out to dinner, just the two of them. Edgan pulled Sieg away.”

“That’s right. The setting is important, isn’t it? I recommended a restaurant a customer took me to when I was working at the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion. But they wound up having a good time at the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion anyway.”

It was impossible for Caroline not to join the conversation after hearing of this development. This was just what happens when three women were gathered together.

“My! So Lynx made a move at last!”

“Well, except there have been no new developments.”

Amber guessed the outcome of the date based on Mariela’s behavior afterward, but the lack of excitement turned the topic of conversation to

Caroline.

“So, Lady Carol, what do you think of Lord Weishardt?”

“Lord Weis? He is a kind person who always worries about his subordinates’ health.”

“...These girls...must cause men so much grief...”

Unlike Elio and Sherry’s deepening friendship, both Mariela and Caroline continued in blissful ignorance of their own affairs. Merle and Amber could only sigh in defeat. And conversation didn’t even end there; they were formidable indeed.

Pallois instinctually knew it was better not to participate in this conversation. He quietly left his seat to keep Emily company.

“Ooh, I like stories with princesses,” she would interject, butting in on Sherry and Elio.

The rain continued outside, and drumming against the skylight and the paved roads in a way that was remarkably loud.

The unchanging interior of Sunlight’s Canopy was an island of calm separated from the outside world.



04



In the instant Lightning Empress Elsee unleashed her attack, the lava of the fifty-sixth stratum became pure white. The image of the massive electrical discharge was burned into their eyes, even after they closed them.

It was accompanied by a thunderous, earsplitting roar. The Heavenbolt struck Haage’s planted sword like a lightning rod, unleashing tremors that shook the earth, demonstrating the tremendous power of the skill.

The Heavenbolt pierced through the red dragon, causing smoke to gush from all over its body and breaking its stance. It began to fall.

“Did we do it?!” yelled a soldier, and Leonhardt responded with another order.

“Not yet! It’s a dragon that lives in a volcano. Finish it off while it’s numb and immobile!”

Everyone started scrambling toward the red dragon while the earth shook under them with the impact of its body against the ground. As Leonhardt said, the only thing damaged by the creature’s fall was the rock it had landed on; the dragon itself, although scorched and smoking in places, had no other visible injuries. Was the twitching due to paralysis and muscle spasms?

They weren’t sure how long the Lightning Empress’s Heavenbolt would restrict the dragon’s movements, but they had to clip its wings while it was on the ground to take away its ability to fly.

Although they didn’t know the extent of the red dragon’s intelligence, these dragons as a whole were very clever. The provocation from shield clanging and the subsequent lightning attack had been effective only because this was the first time it had battled humans, and the ruse likely wouldn’t work a second time.

The dragon boasted overwhelming strength, but it had only used the same breath attacks on scouts and the maintenance unit. There were no other monsters in this stratum besides the volcano, which moved around but didn’t even have a head. The red dragon had passed the time with no intellectual stimulation. It was this lack of combat experience that gave the Forces an opening.

This situation could be likened to when the stratum opened to reveal a blast of gas. It had damaged the Labyrinth Suppression Forces so effectively because they had never confronted anything like it.

“Quickly! Now’s our chance to finish it off!” shouted Leonhardt.

With that, everyone’s will became one. They had to defeat the red dragon before it learned from this experience and began a complicated attack.

That was why they forgot a crucial detail: A Walking Mountain of Fire existed in this stratum.

Boom! Boom! Boom-boom-boom!

Without any warning, lava exploded from all the pools at the same time.

The Walking Mountain of Fire plodded sluggishly toward them. It was still far away. But was this entire stratum part of the monster's body?

The soldiers must have been able to avoid a direct hit because of their A-Rank abilities. Weishardt's layer of ice melted in an instant from the sudden uptick in temperature.

"Gah!"

The scorching air burned the lungs of those unfortunate enough to inhale. Others suffered damage to their hands and feet due to the weakened ice layer. Though gloves and other protective layers covered their hands and feet, they gritted their teeth, probably from the burnt skin and sores underneath.

"Ice Field, brother! The potions!" shouted Weishardt.

"These injuries can be dealt with later! Focus on the foe before us!"

As soon as they received the protection from the ice, all soldiers began to sprint forward again. Magma erupted from the surrounding lava pools in scorching geysers, creating a rain of lava rocks. Anywhere they touched without the Ice Field's protection caused deep burns, but they couldn't afford to pay any attention to that.

Along with another magic user who'd gotten in the range to use attacks, Lightning Empress Elsee prepared her spells to fire them all at once. Dick gripped his black spear and assumed an attack stance, while Leonhardt and Haage, swords in hand, tensed their legs to prepare to leap upon the enemy.

Just a little farther and the red dragon would be near enough for melee attacks.

Just a little farther.

They were so close.

And they would have gotten there if it weren't for the eruptions caused by the Walking Mountain of Fire.

And the red dragon fluttered its eyes open right at that moment. Perhaps the Labyrinth owner's ill will toward them had caused such a cruel twist of fate.

With a whoosh, it attacked its diminutive enemies in a billow of dirty smoke and hot air and soared into the sky once more.

"Thunderbolt!"

"Stone Lance!"

Lightning Empress Elsee and the magic user of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces launched their spells at the red dragon before it completely left their range. But their magic hadn't been charged enough, and even the two attacks combined couldn't compare to Elsee's previous blow. It only served to provoke the enraged red dragon that they'd knocked to the ground before.

The dragon's enormous maw opened. It still flew low to the ground, and there was no way anyone could avoid its hot breath at point-blank range.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!"

"Take thiiiiiiiis!"

Each person faced the dragon rapidly rising out of their range and launched swords and spears at it. They at least needed to change the trajectory of its breath.

However, their attacks didn't reach the red dragon, and it aimed its breath at Lightning Empress Elsee.

"Lightning Empress!"

At once Weishardt let loose a wall of ice to protect her, but it vanished like paper before the flames. Although Lightning Empress Elsee naturally tried to fall back, she couldn't move out of the way fast enough at this distance.

Darling, Pallois, Elio...

Lightning Empress Elsee—no, Elmera, the one who went to war dreaming of a happy future for her family. What did she think of? What did she see before the scorching heat of the dragon's breath consumed her?

B-b-b-boooooooooom.

The breath made impact with Lightning Empress Elsee at point-blank range without losing the slightest bit of momentum. It was an attack with enough power to shake the entire stratum. The surrounding earth was blown away, and the blast decimated the vicinity. The ice protecting her disappeared in an instant, and as Leonhardt, Haage, and Dick leaped at the dragon, their protection evaporated, too. The hot wind licked at their bodies as they went flying.

The fire was that powerful. Not even cinders would remain of anyone, human or otherwise, who were unlucky enough to take a direct hit.

The red dragon roared in triumph as it flew even higher. With every beat of its wings, gale-force winds ravaged the area, sweeping away the ashes of whatever had met its fire.

Lightning Empress...!!!

Leonhardt, Haage, and Dick couldn't speak, only hack up blood. It wasn't just their throats that sustained damage when they lost their ice protection and inhaled the blistering air; their very lungs had been burned, too.

And yet, they crawled along the scorching earth with a glimmer of hope that Lightning Empress Elsee still lived.

The site of impact had collapsed like a crater.

The ground had been exposed by the wind from the red dragon's wings, and a lone man stood shielding Lightning Empress Elsee.

He was taller than average, clad in mundane clothing worn by commoners. He didn't look like he belonged in the deepest part of the Labyrinth. Moreover, his sleeves and pant cuffs were burned to a crisp, and all that remained was what he wore on his torso. Despite his lack of clothing and his unwarrior-like build, his limbs weren't even scratched.

But above all else, this man standing barefoot on the scorching earth with no ice protection didn't have a single burn—not even something as mild as a sunburn could be seen on his exposed limbs.

The man had extremely gentle features. He looked in wonder at Lightning Empress Elsee from behind his glasses, of which nothing remained except a

warped frame, and murmured, “Elme.....ra?” as if groping for a vague memory.

“Darling!”

Crackle-crackle-crackle-pop!

Lightning Empress Elsee—no, the beloved wife of Voyd, Elmera threw her arms around her husband’s neck, or so it seemed as the mother of all popping sounds assaulted the man who’d saved his wife by a hairsbreadth. Her control over her electricity must have slackened due to her overwhelming emotion.

“!!! Ah, *I remember now*. Elmera. You’re absolutely electrifying, my dear.”

Not one person had the time to quip, “Physically, at least.”

The red dragon had certainly aimed for Elmera, and Voyd had saved her.

But how? Why did this man suffer not even a single burn in this stratum?

Voyd called out to Weishardt, who was almost possessed by this question. “You should expand your Ice Shield.”

Weishardt snapped to his senses and extended ice protection to everyone at once. All the soldiers had wounds covering their bodies, but after removing their masks and downing high-grade potions, they recovered to the point where they could move again.



Even as they did so, the red dragon steadily rose higher and higher, until it was too high even for Heavenbolt.

“Rrrrrrooooooooooar!”

They could hear the creature’s sheer fury in its cry.

It had retaliated from being knocked to the ground. Although its breath should have burned its enemies to ashes, it hadn’t killed a single one of them.

Fwoosh-fwoosh-fwoosh.

The dragon fired its breath at random. The strength of each shot was low, but they had more than enough firepower to burn an A-Ranker to death—and they came in rapid succession.

“Rising Dragon Spear.”

Although Dick’s attack averted the dragon’s breath, he had few mythrilspears remaining.

“Wind Storm.”

“Ice Shield.”

With the mage’s wind magic, the dragon’s fire couldn’t generate enough power, and the shield knight let it hit his shield diagonally to divert it.

And yet, his left arm gripping the shield still suffered severe burns.

The dragon’s maw opened once again to fire the next attack. Would they be able to avoid this one?

“If you retreat, I will cover everyone.”

In the midst of the blast sweeping over the area, Voyd’s calm voice reached Leonhardt’s ears.

The operation is a failure. Leonhardt hesitated. The red dragon was in the sky again, aiming its rain of fire more precisely than before. It was unlikely to come down within range again, and even if it did, Lightning Empress wouldn’t have enough time to prepare her Heavenbolt.

But if we retreat now...

The red dragon would be further strengthened from the battle experience. By the time they challenged it again, it might have developed a resistance to the Heavenbolt that struck it down before.

Rrrrrrrumble, rrrrrrrumble. The volcano was getting closer.

If the battle lasted much longer, they'd have to fight it, too.

He looked at Haage, who put his life on the line; Lightning Empress Elsee, who'd almost died just now; and Dick, who gripped his few remaining mythrill spears. He looked at Weishardt, who fought beside him, and the officers of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces.

They all understood the situation. Even if they kept fighting, they wouldn't reach the red dragon.

They all knew what would happen if they retreated now, too.

That was why no one gave up. They were willing to fight to the last breath; if there was any possibility of defeating their foe, they wanted to continue the battle.

That's why Leonhardt gave the order.

"Retreat!"

We must not exhaust ourselves here.

"A wise move," called out Weishardt.

The group began to hustle toward the stratum stairs, and the red dragon blew out to stop them.

The shield knight and Dick served as the rear guard. They would divert and repel the dragon's breath to protect everyone. The interval between the dragon's successive attacks decreased and their accuracy increased, as if it was getting used to handling them. The dragon seemed to have lost its mind, firing at the group hurrying to the stratum's exit. But the two in the rear no heed to their severe burns as they decisively parried the breath attacks. Leonhardt was their leader and held their lives in his hands, and he'd chosen to retreat. The pair who'd fought with him for a long time on the fields of battle understood what he was thinking. If Leonhardt decided to retreat, if he decided to prioritize

the lives of everyone present, he would use everything at his disposal to return everyone to the surface. But Dick had a limited number of mythril spears, and the shield knight's shield was steadily losing strength as the breath scorched it.

Before long, the spears ran out and the shield became unusable. The pair remained at the back of the group to protect them, and they were taking up weapons to face the red dragon when Voyd suddenly stepped between them and the creature.

"H-hey, you!" Dick blurted out.

He understood the man had just saved Lightning Empress Elsee's life. However, he didn't know how. This man who walked barefoot in the stratum without a single burn couldn't be a normal citizen. But Dick didn't detect any particular strength or any of the undulating magical power of a mage from this man.

By all appearances, he's perfectly ordinary...

Shiver. The Ice Shield didn't completely block out all the heat of the blistering stratum, yet Dick had goose bumps all over his body.

"Hollow Rift."

To Dick, the motion of Voyd's hand reminded him of shooing away gnats.

Something spread out from the tip of the hand he waved around, and the dragon's breath in that spot vanished as if he'd erased it.

To assign colors to it, it could be said to be black and white. Pure black and pure white. These two colors were hardly ever seen together in the natural world, combining together like a mosaic, making them feel out of place.

But above all else, just looking at this *something* made him feel anxious and restless, like he was falling. Like he would be swallowed up without taking a single step. Like his own body was turning inside out.

He could detect no heat, mass, or volume from it. It had to have been the Hollow Rift, but the dragon's breath vanished like it had no mass or heat as soon as it touched it.

"Now, let's hurry. If I stay here, I may *forget*." Voyd urged Dick on as if

nothing had happened.

Dick's hearing had finally recovered from Heavenbolt's explosion, and it was picking up a sizzling sound coming from Voyd's feet.

The soles of his feet are getting burned... But are they healing instantly...?

It wasn't that Voyd took no damage from this scorching stratum. Rather, he had taken damage that was healed with incredible power.

This ability... That was as much as Dick could process.

His eyes met Voyd's. The man had a horribly calm face, and his eyes, always concealed by glasses, were distinctly hollow themselves.

"Darling, darling! Why? You said you wanted a quiet life, so that's why I..."

As soon as they were no longer in danger, Elmera embraced Voyd, sobbing. The group had managed to escape the dragon, taking refuge in the safe zone near the stairs—which could be attributed to Dick, the shield knight, and Voyd's protection.

"My dear," he tenderly replied, "life without you would be empty and meaningless. We should go home for today."

Voyd still looked out of place in the deepest part of the Labyrinth.

Weishardt had a feeling he should find out the identity of the man who had rescued Elmera—and everyone else—from their predicament. He was about to call out to Voyd when Leonhardt stopped him. It was impossible for him to believe it was a coincidence, but he had a rough idea of this man's identity. If he was correct, the other man wasn't someone they could afford to call to carelessly.

"Retreat. Return to the base."

The ceiling near the stratum stairs was too low for the red dragon to reach them while flying. But it had to be furious that its prey had escaped because it had low, unleashing its hot breath into the cave entrance at the stratum stairs. The explosions from the attack could still reach them.

The Walking Fire Mountain was approaching, and there was no way for them to predict what might happen.

With overwhelming sorrow, he made the decision to retreat. They couldn't afford to incur injury here. After the bare minimum treatment, the group returned to their base via a Teleportation Circle and the underground Aqueduct.

After gathering at the lowest stratum, the strongest fighters in the Labyrinth City had retreated without so much as defeating the stratum boss's guardian, never mind the boss itself.

It felt just like when Leonhardt received the petrification curse.

Even far from the fifty-sixth stratum, he thought he could still hear the red dragon's roar. It didn't want them to get away. It was trying to bury them here—so that they would never threaten this place, or the Labyrinth, again.

—It was a common phenomenon in the Labyrinth.

When a strong adventurer or group of adventurers was wounded and in retreat, the stronger monsters of the strata where they were would appear to deliver the finishing blow.

When Leonhardt had received the petrification curse, B-Rank krakens had surged out in abnormally large numbers in the thirtieth stratum, where only C-Rank monsters appeared. Dozens of C-Rank adventurers had been there. According to Lightning Empress Elsee's theory, the krakens were one rank above those adventurers who had been deployed to defeat them. She undertook the task of dealing with them. An ocean water stratum had the maximum possible affinity with thunder magic, so she easily dispatched them, and the wholesale market flourished.

This time, two adventurers aiming to reach A Rank and an alchemist possessing immense magical power happened to be present in the twenty-third stratum, a place of perennial night.



Mariela couldn't see what had appeared.

All she knew was that several “somethings” had appeared from the stream water, tall enough that she had to crane her neck to take them in. The one closest to her swung something resembling an arm down at her.

Bam. She heard the sound of something being smacked aside.

The raptor had whipped its body to strike away the arm with its tail, and the tail itself was torn to pieces. Only the raptor suffered injury, while the something raised its arm to swing down at Mariela again.

“Grar! Grar.”

Mariela couldn't keep up with what was happening. The raptor lowered its head to scoop her onto its back, then broke into a sprint in the direction of Lynx and Sieg.

“Eek! Ah!” yelped Mariela.

It was a short distance, but the only reason Mariela wasn't thrown off the back of the raptor was because she was practically buried in the large heap of lunamagia she'd face-planted into. And the reason the claws of the thing in pursuit only took off half the raptor's tail was because the herbs flying off its back acted as a smoke screen. Lynx and Sieg came running to intercept them, and Mariela was able to join back up with the pair.

“Mariela! Are you hurt?!”

“Shit! Why are there death lizards in this shallow stratum?!”

Mariela slid down from the raptor, and Sieg hurriedly checked her over. She didn't appear to be hurt. Instead, the raptor who saved her had lost half its tail, and although it had only run for a matter of seconds, it had exhausted itself.

That was to be expected. A death lizard was an A-Rank monster, even if its cognition was as fuzzy as a newborn's. The raptor wouldn't stand a chance—especially one who couldn't even handle a C-Rank lizardman. But the raptor had managed to flick away the arm of the death lizard attacking Mariela, escaping with her on its back.

Death lizards crawled out of the streams one after another.

Although they were supposed to be superior to lizardmen, their backs were rounded like a previous step of evolution, and their limbs were lanky. However, they had four arms, and the way they crawled on all fours resembled spiders, as if their joints were neither human nor reptilian. They didn't have individual fingers, and the sharpened tips of their limbs, like sickles or spearheads, made them seem even more repulsive.

Their faces had long snouts like the animals called "crocodiles" that she'd heard of in stories, but the huge mouths were divided into at least three parts. As the split widened between the top and bottom jaws, both of them split to the left and right as well, ready to grab something. Each mouth had split into six. If you only considered their shape, they looked like flowers. But whenever they opened and closed, they resembled mollusk tentacles trying to catch something. This movement was nothing like chewing. This body part appeared to be a head, instead of a hand. The only indication that it *was* a head was the eyes with three or four pupils that wriggled around at a normal eye location.

The body of every single one was pure white, though they appeared bluish-white under the light of the moonstones in the night stratum. The torn mouths and the tips of the limbs were dyed with a wet and shiny red like fresh blood, and veins visibly ran through the white bodies like parasites beneath their skin.

When the death lizards climbed onto land and stood on their two legs, the four bladelike arms glittered. Lynx and Sieg knew how sharp they were from the way they'd sliced up the raptor's tail just by touching it.

"Mariela, head for the stairs while we hold 'em back," Lynx directed.

Mariela nodded silently in response. She obeyed knowing that she wouldn't just be unhelpful—she would be actively in their way. The raptor headed toward the stairs as if guiding her, and Jay followed after them.

A death lizard sprang at them to keep its easy prey from escaping, but countless shadow daggers skewered its body, while Sieg lopped off another individual's limbs with his sword.

"I won't let you pass," Lynx called out to the death lizards to provoke them, while Sieg silently took a stance with his sword.

If their opponents had been the B-Rank needle apes or wyverns, they would

already be defeated. But death lizards were powerful A-Rank enemies. The one skewered by the shadow daggers tore them out as it stood up, while bony protrusions grew out of the stumps of the other one to replace its missing limbs.

“Yah!” Sieg slashed at the death lizard before it could launch its next attack. One hit, then another. The death lizard’s claws stopped his sword, and he couldn’t deliver the fatal blow.

Lynx pierced his death lizard with shadow daggers once again to keep it in place, then leaped on it and sliced its neck with his short sword. Sieg infused his sword with magic to fight off four-armed attacks, then sent wind magic at the regenerated legs before finally cutting the creature down until it could no longer move.

Each of them killed one death lizard for a total of two. They’d defeated A-Rank monsters.

But while they were fighting death lizards continued to spring forth and surrounded the pair. Lynx and Sieg stood back-to-back to look out for each other and defended against the monsters’ attacks. Even if they fought them one at a time, they were outnumbered. Although their two swords whittled down the death lizards, their arms and legs sustained wounds from counterattacks. This was a losing battle.

But that didn’t bother them. As long as Mariela escaped. Even if they were surrounded by death lizards, Lynx and Sieg could break away if they didn’t have to protect her. As if understanding this, Mariela urged the raptor on while she ran with all her might toward the stratum stairs.

Just a little farther to the stairs. It was just a little farther.

If only there hadn’t been a small stream next to the tree near the stairs.

“Mariela!!!”

Was that Lynx or Sieg?

A death lizard rustled loudly as it crawled from the water on all six limbs. Lynx and Sieg could clearly perceive its movements, but Mariela had no hope of avoiding it.

They were far from her, and the monster crawling from the stream would reach Mariela much faster than they could break through the wall of death lizards and run to her.

Reaching her was impossible. The only outcome they could see was the death lizard's sharp claws running Mariela through. They couldn't allow that to happen, no matter what.

Lynx threw all the magical power in his body into an Order. *"Jay, move in front of it."*

Jay immediately understood what he was being told to do: "Die in her place."

She didn't choose me! That's why everythin's gone wrong! This pain! This bullshit! It's all her fault! And yet! And yet! You're tellin' me to die for her?! Jay howled in his mind, but he had no way to resist the Order.

He tried to stop his legs to fight against death, but all of Lynx's magical power made his legs and his will submit. As he moved to the front, he experienced an agonizing pain in his legs like pins and needles shooting through his limbs.

Damn it! Screw it! Damn!

What could Jay do—the foolish, the pitiful, the weak? He couldn't even disobey an Order to die; all he could do was spew malice and envy and bitterness.

I don't wanna die 'cause of her! It's her fault! Everythin' is her fault! Damn it! If I die, if I die 'cause of her! Then I'll.....!!!

What could Jay do?

All he could do was seize the arms of Mariela—powerless and helpless—and thrust her in front of him.

He wasn't disobeying his Order. But he felt a sharp pain in his Cursed Tooth.

A wicked, perverse sort of joy started to well up from the depths of his heart. It washed over Jay's soul and dulled the pain from the Cursed Tooth.

When he seized her arms and shoved her in front of him, Mariela thought she heard Jay's voice.



“IT’S ALL YOUR FAULT—”

“JAAAAAAAAAAYYYYYYYY!!!!!!”

“MARIELAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!”

The men’s howls echoed in the stratum of eternal night and faintly glowing moonstones.

The death lizard’s gaze had been on Jay, but now it shifted to Mariela once more.

Smirk. On its white face, its mouth looked like a bleeding wound as it split open in a sneer.

It raised its two arms overhead to strike at Mariela, who was petrified in fear.

This movement was extremely slow, and the monster appeared to be making sport of its pitiful, frozen prey.

Ah, the thing was almost close enough.

The slave brand burned onto Siegmund’s chest throbbed with pain. It told him his master was in danger. Mustering all his strength, Siegmund kicked against the ground. He cut a swath through the enemies in front of him and launched wind blades. But he was no mage, and the death lizards easily repelled his magic.

Mariela, Mariela, Mariela, Mariela... Sieg’s thoughts accelerated. Although the death lizard’s movements seemed incredibly slow, his own body wouldn’t follow his directions.

He wasn’t going to make it...

Was this what despair felt like? Like your heart being crushed?

But just before the blade of death could run her through, the very shadows filling the entire stratum stretched out to protect her.

“Gh...Urg...”

“Ly...Lynx...?”

Lynx had melted into the shadows and slipped through the path that Sieg had

forged by cutting down the death lizards—and he had arrived in front of Mariela. His movements, his speed surpassed anything that he'd ever done before. It wasn't just that his presence was hidden; rather, his very body passed through the shadows to move instantaneously. He had attained a shadowmaster's state of mind.

Ah, Lynx had protected and saved Mariela by a hairsbreadth, and the death lizard's claw protruded from his stomach.

"Go...," Lynx urged Mariela to run as blood streamed from his mouth.

"Ah... Lynx! Lynx, you're bleeding..."

"Raptor!"

As Mariela trembled with anxiety, the raptor grabbed her cloak in its mouth and began dragging her toward the stairs.

"Shadow Rend."

Lynx's skill ripped the shadow of the attacking lizard in half from bottom to top—and the body of the creature itself followed suit.

"Gahg..." When the death lizard had fallen, Lynx took a step forward and pulled out the claw in his stomach.

"Lynx, you good?!" shouted Sieg.

"I'm...not... You got a...potion?"

"Mariela has them."

Jay's excessive staring had bothered them, which meant today was the one day they hadn't gotten potions from Mariela.

"You stay here. I'll get to her."

"What're you saying? Don't be...stupid..." With a cough that brought up a mouthful of blood, Lynx assumed a stance with his short sword. Blood was pouring out from the wound in his stomach and staining all the fabric below it completely red.

Ha-ha, I'm in deep shit now, huh...?

Lynx was aware he'd suffered injury to a vital organ. Nevertheless, he couldn't

afford to withdraw. Death lizards had caught the scent of blood, coming to surround him. He wouldn't lead this many enemies to Mariela. Besides, it wasn't possible for Sieg to face all of them by himself and survive.

I screwed up...

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Sieg protecting him and continuing to fight despite his injuries, while Lynx himself used shadowmaster skills to confine the death lizards.

Can't believe he used Mariela as a shield...

The cause of this predicament, Jay continued to follow Lynx's Order: "Move in front."

One step, then another.

"Ee-ee-ee-ee-ee!"

Jay must have been tearing his damaged vocal cords from making these sounds. His throat only let him breathe, swallow food and drink, and create this strangled noise. Was he laughing? Or was he screaming?

One step, then another.

His advancing feet were no longer touching the ground.

More than one death lizard had emerged from that stream. The second lizard had long since spotted Jay, and it ran the feeble man through.

"Ee-ee-ee-ee, kh-kh-kh-kh!"

The death lizard smirked at the red blood spilling from Jay's mouth.

Stab. Two claws pierced his abdomen.

Grip. Another lizard's claws pierced his left lung.

Pierce. Stab. Grind. Crunch. Spurt. Splat. Splurt.

The death lizards lifted the torn chunks of meat, and their mouths split into three, or four, or six. Those mouths didn't look like they belonged on any normal creature, yet the expression they made was the picture of maniacal laughter.

Chomp.

How long did Jay's consciousness remain intact? What was his final thought? No one would ever know. What was once known as "Jay" was something even less than pieces of meat; all that remained was the liquid staining the death lizards' mouths red and dripping onto the earth.

Along with the rest of the Black Iron Freight Corps, Lynx valued Jay very little. Since they worked together, Jay had many opportunities to find out all sorts of information, which was why they couldn't return him to his previous owner, even without the power of speech. They'd only found just enough value in him to not kill him outright.

That's the sort of man who had been nearest to Mariela. It was no wonder Lynx thought to use him as a sacrifice.

He never considered Jay might grab her and use her as a shield. It didn't matter whether he saw value in this slave because Lynx had never thought of Jay as a human being I shoulda...been more careful. Damn it.

His vision was starting to blur, but Lynx fended off the death lizards with his shadow blades. His body had lost a lot of blood and begun to stop cooperating with his brain. Meanwhile, his shadowmaster skills consumed an extreme amount of magical power. It wasn't meant for drawn-out battles, but he couldn't afford to hold back. Besides, soon...

The death lizard's attacks played out frame by frame. No, his consciousness had started to get hazy. In the flickering, changing scenery, he recognized the claw of a death lizard rushing at him.

This...is it... Lynx gazed at the claw about to pierce his body as if this were happening to someone else.

In that instant, the image violently shook, and his body swung into the air.

"Lynx, let's go!" Sieg had rushed at Lynx and nearly tackled him, carrying them both away from the death lizard's attack and breaking into a run with Lynx on his shoulder.

Ah, so Mariela was able to escape...? Lynx managed to think. *Thank goodness.* His consciousness was nearly gone.

I'm glad. Mariela, that "ordinary girl," made it out safe...

Memories from his childhood flooded Lynx's mind. It was like going back in time and watching them in fast-forward.

Oh, this was when I was a kid.

Back then, when he had enjoyed fairy tales.



06



"Nah, girls like that don't exist," Lynx declared precociously.

The teacher at the orphanage adopted a slightly troubled expression.

There was a group of girls who also had been listening to the teacher reading a picture book aloud. At least, until Lynx interrupted her. With almost feral looks, they protested.

I mean, just look at how pushy they are. You're tellin' me this "ordinary girl" is humble and sweet and nice to everyone? You're makin' that up.

Born in the Labyrinth City and raised in the orphanage, Lynx had always been surrounded by girls with either physical or mental strength—and a lot of it.

That was inevitable. They were in the Labyrinth City, where the physically strong became adventurers or entered the Labyrinth Suppression Forces to subjugate the Labyrinth. More than half of them died or sustained serious injuries and ended up in the slums.

Even if someone rose up in the world as an adventurer, they might become a slum resident or monster grub the next day.

The shop owners and farmers were the only civilians with stable incomes. Only a miniscule fraction of adventurers with the means to survive became successful. Those with relative wealth continued to secure safe and stable lives for generations. Even if the girls from the orphanage had skills to run a business, they would be worked to the bone until they no longer served a purpose and

were disposed of. They had little hope of reaching the upper echelon.

This was the reality for the girls in Lynx's life—well, for the majority of the women in the Labyrinth City. That said, it never crossed their minds to catch the attention of a wealthy man to support them. Even from a young age, these pragmatic girls chose not to rely on sources of income that could be temporary, instead focusing on ways to make money themselves.

In itself, that wasn't a bad thing. But they were too strong for the young boys who were busy catching insects for bug battle tournaments or balling up old rags to kick around until sunset.

To Lynx, he thought an "ordinary girl" who was unreliable and kind and stayed by your side without expecting anything in return was more of a fairy tale than any story his teacher had read to them.

As he grew older, this was further cemented in his mind.

Particularly after he joined the Black Iron Freight Corps to be near Dick, the famous black spear wielder and his idol.

They would stay at inns exclusively for men to rest, so he'd only come across women who had jobs to provide nighttime entertainment. Their affections were for sale. Even though he knew their sweet smiles were transactional, he was too pure at seventeen to indulge.

Which was why he was surprised when he first met Mariela.

To start with, she was unfashionable. *Why's she wearing a grass skirt? I finally meet a young girl and she's a big mess*, he had thought.

And her mannerisms and word choice. There was no doubt she was a very inexperienced country girl. She had to be hurting for money, but she never once tried to butter him up to get her needs met. Plus, when she changed into her new clothes in the Labyrinth City, she was unexpectedly cute. She had clumsy, pudgy little legs and a certain puzzled expression that showed up whenever something had gone over her head. The more he got used to these things about her, the more adorable she seemed.

And it wasn't like she was stupid. She had such a wealth of knowledge about medicinal herbs that even old man Ghark liked her. She could use mysterious

techniques that she'd unveiled at the forest when they'd first met.

She cut his hair for him and gave him her leftovers. He saw no intention of demanding anything in return. When he realized her smiles at him, their amazing conversations, her nonchalant kindness, and her considerate nature were all a matter of course to her—his heart sped up.

When she gave him cookies and he realized she was genuinely worried about him, he was incredibly happy.

He'd bought her that trick pendant as a souvenir, something he happened to find at a stall in the imperial capital. Although it wasn't an expensive gift, he'd thought it would look good on Mariela. It was his first time giving an accessory to a woman, so he was somehow a little embarrassed when he handed it to her. He'd played a little trick on her, but Mariela always wore it. Every time he saw the pendant swaying against her chest, he felt overcome with joy.

Other than the fact she was a Pact-Bearer Alchemist who could make potions in the Labyrinth City, Lynx felt Mariela was the very definition of an *ordinary girl*.

Spending time with her was just fun.

She appeared so carefree, always laughing or fuming or pouting or stuffing her face—and no matter what, he just couldn't take his eyes off her. He almost couldn't stand how cute she was when she put on weight on her arms and legs and cheeks, everywhere that she didn't need it.

When she passed time with everyone in Sunlight's Canopy, Mariela seemed blissful—as close to a normal girl as possible. And when she excitedly explained potions to him at the cellar at night, he could just tell how much she loved alchemy.

Their time together had been comfortable, warm, as if the light from her candle let him see his own ambiguous future spread out before him.

With Mariela, he could become the person he wanted to become. He could even be proud of the underhanded shadowmaster skills he'd never asked for.

Being the sole alchemist in the Labyrinth City had to be a heavy burden on Mariela. An "ordinary girl" shouldn't have to carry that. Every day as he carried

potions, Lynx wondered if that weight would someday make her smile disappear.

We gotta destroy the Labyrinth, he'd recently started to think.

If the Labyrinth was destroyed before Mariela's identity was known, and the ley line was returned to human hands, the number of alchemists would increase. Mariela could become an "ordinary alchemist," living in Sunlight's Canopy with her usual smile.

If he and Sieg became A-Rankers, if they got stronger and stronger, the Labyrinth's fall would be that much closer. Lynx had invited Sieg to hunt wyverns with that thought in mind.

I want her...to smile...

Except in his blurry vision, he could see Mariela was crying.

"Lyyynx.....! Hang on! Please! Why?! Why isn't the potion...?!" Mariela screamed in grief, tears tumbling down her cheeks.

"Ma...riel..."

He wanted to tell her not to cry, that he wanted to see her smile, and yet...

Why wouldn't his voice...?



07



Siegmund brandished his sword. Out of the corner of his eyes, he watched the raptor trying to convince Mariela to move toward the stratum stairs.

To distract the death lizards heading in her direction, he fired off some particularly showy spells and drew their attention to himself. Lynx had been protecting Mariela and pierced through the stomach, but he was still using his shadowmaster skills to immobilize the death lizards despite his failing body. This was the reason Sieg managed to stay alive.

The basilisk leather armor on Sieg's left arm turned aside the claws of the

death lizards that endlessly swiped at them. If he hadn't been wearing leather of a higher rank than the monsters, they probably would have already turned him into pieces of meat. The armor stopped the thrust of a death lizard claw a few inches from his body. As long as they didn't repeatedly probe the same spot, it wouldn't tear. But the unprotected part of his left arm already had several cuts. Although none of his vital organs had been damaged, his stomach and back had been lacerated.

He was careful not to let his legs get too injured, which would prevent him from escaping, but he was wounded all over.

She's still not there...?!

Although she took a tumble, Mariela was making progress, and in a few steps, she would make it to the stairs.

As Sieg slashed at a death lizard going for Lynx and lopped off its two left arms, he took a blow to his own left arm from its right. With a pop, the claw broke through the armor and punctured his arm. This one had reached the bone. Despite the agonizing pain, he bit down a cry and whacked off the death lizard's right arm and head.

She's still not there...?!

As he was eradicating one monster, two more stabbed their claws into his back.

"Gah... Ph..." He forcibly swallowed the blood filling his mouth. If he spit it out, he would briefly leave himself open to even more blows.

She still hasn't reached it...?

Just a few more seconds until Mariela reached the safe zone, but the time felt like an eternity. As he thought about her safety, he tried to reassure himself that he could still put up a good fight.

When he first came to the Labyrinth City and met Mariela, he was in worse shape than he was now. He hadn't returned to that point. He was still alive. As long as he didn't die, as long as he could draw away the death lizards, Mariela would survive, he told himself, and he mustered his courage.

Lynx's movements grew more and more unsteady. He'd reached his limit.

Just then, Sieg heard the raptor's cry confirming Mariela had escaped to the safe zone.

Lynx! I'll save you now!

Although Sieg's left arm was still attached, he couldn't move his fingers. He couldn't afford to drop his sword, and he no longer had any strength remaining to defeat the death lizards approaching Lynx.

To hell with it!

Sieg threw his entire weight into pushing Lynx out of the way and scooped him onto his left shoulder. As he slipped away from the death lizards, one of them struck his right leg and took off a chunk of flesh.

But he could still move. He could still run.

Faster! Faster! Faster!!

He had to make it in time.

Mariela had just escaped. Lynx had saved her, and now Sieg would save him.

Six months ago, Sieg would never have fathomed risking his life to save the man who might take Mariela from him—and take the only place that Sieg belonged. But now Siegmund prayed from the bottom of his heart that Lynx would live.

Lynx had once rebuked him for focusing only on himself after meeting a wonderful master like Mariela. He had been thin and fragile even with his injuries healed, but Lynx treated this slave as Mariela's escort.

And Lynx had showed Siegmund how to be Mariela's guardian.

But more important than all that—ever since their training at the Ahriman Springs, when they watched each other's backs as they fought together, Sieg had come to think of Lynx as his dearest friend.

“Mariela! Lynx needs a potion!”

Sieg and Lynx practically collapsed into the safe zone.

“Lynx!”

With shaking hands, Mariela took a high-grade potion from the pouch at her waist and sprinkled it over the gaping hole in Lynx's abdomen. His complexion was as white as a corpse, and his body had lost so much blood that it was as cold as the stone walls of the merciless labyrinth.

"That's strange. It's not shining. It's not healing anything. The wound isn't closing up. Lynx's...eyes aren't...opening."

Normally, the potion would activate a faint light, healing the wound and returning Lynx to consciousness. But neither was happening as his body grew colder and colder.

"Lyyynx.....! Hang on! Please! Why?! Why isn't the potion.....?!" Mariela's heart pounded against her chest.

That potion just hadn't been enough.

Mariela took out one more, pouring it into Lynx's mouth. Even if he didn't swallow, his body should absorb it, but all the liquid spilled back out of his mouth.

"This is... This is all wrong! Completely wrong! Why?! *Hey!* Why, Lynx?! Why aren't you waking up?" Mariela was repeating herself, feeling dizzy from the thoughts going around and around in her mind. "Lynx! *Lynx!* Hey, Lynx! I'm talking to you. Wake up! Please. Hey, you! Lynx!" Mariela gave Lynx more potions, shaking his body.

From his experience, Sieg knew that life was unalterable. As Mariela fell into a panic, Sieg had let his mind go to dark places, arriving at a bitter truth that he refused to accept.

"Hey, Lynx! You can hear me, right? Hey, please! Please don't... No..." Mariela's tears spilled onto Lynx's cheeks.

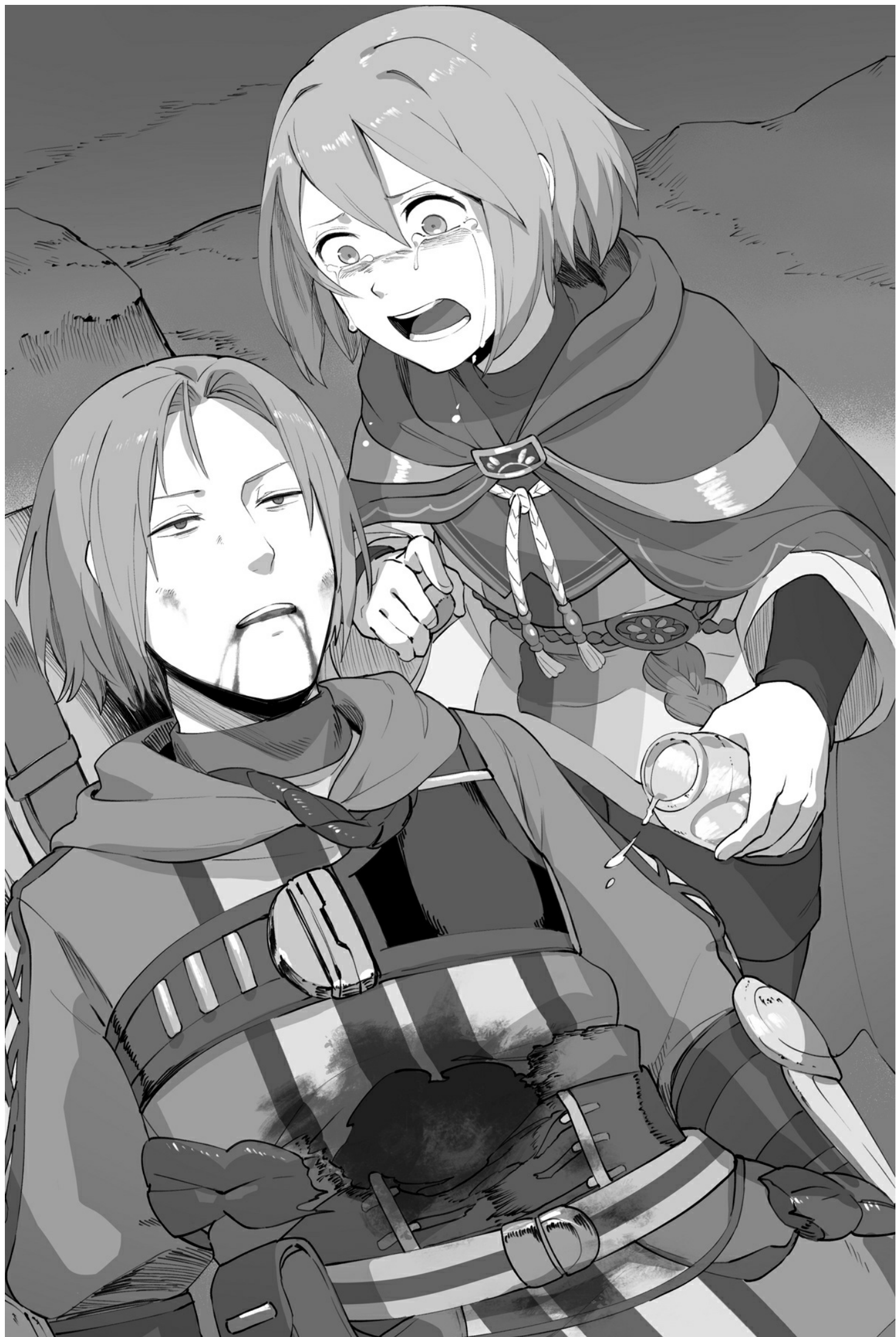
Her voice—her deepest wish—must have gotten through.

At that moment, Lynx's eyes opened just a little, and he murmured in a low voice.

"Ma...riel...I wanted...destroy...la...rin...to see...smile..."

"Lynx? Lynx! Lynx! *Lynx!* LYNX!!!" Mariela clung to Lynx and called his name

like she'd lost her mind, and Sieg gently held her back.



“Sieg? Why? Lynx opened his eyes just now, right? I heard his voice.....”

“Mariela, Lynx is...” Siegmund thought his eyes had met Lynx’s for just an instant. He didn’t know if Lynx had fully registered him. But he felt he could hear Lynx’s silent wish: *I’m entrusting her to you*. It had been the same sentiment that Lynx had shown him when he passed him his short sword in the rear yard of the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion—back when they first met.

That’s why he couldn’t stop for even a moment. For Sieg, there was no other option than to accept this charge.

“No... No. NO! This is horrible, Sieg. Why would this happen?! Why did Lynx...”

Potions were magic medicine. They could heal a person’s wounds instantaneously, even when their strength was gone.

However, they couldn’t bring back the dead.

In that moment when his life had burned so low, even potions didn’t work, Lynx had been able to open his eyes and speak. Was it from the potions given to him?

Or was it a miracle made possible by Lynx’s dying wish to see her, to look at her face one last time...?

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!!!!!”

Her wails echoed throughout the Labyrinth’s twenty-third stratum, the Shores of Eternal Night, painting it with grief.



08



Siegmund used the last remaining high-grade potion to heal his own wounds enough that he could move and to stop the bleeding on the raptor’s tail. Then he placed Lynx’s body on the raptor’s back, holding the weeping Mariela with his left arm before escaping from the Labyrinth.

At the entrance, the soldier in charge of the alarm bell was someone Sieg had

met at the Ahriman Springs. As soon as he grasped what had happened to Lynx, he listened to Sieg's story about the monsters before letting him and Mariela go. The soldier told the pair to take Lynx back to Sunlight's Canopy and that he would contact the Black Iron Freight Corps.

Sieg bowed his head deeply for the soldier's help. He led Mariela, who continued to sob in a foggy daze, toward the shop in the pouring rain.

Thank goodness it's raining.

The downpour veiled Sieg and Mariela, including their expressions.

Amber was the first to notice them entering through the back door when they arrived at Sunlight's Canopy. After seeing Lynx's body and hearing from Sieg that the Black Iron Freight Corps had been contacted by way of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, she took charge without letting any emotion show.

"Something urgent has come up. I'm very sorry, but we'll need to close the shop for the day," she said, ushering the regulars home before locking the doors.

A carriage came to get Caroline, and Amber asked her to take the children home. After Sunlight's Canopy was empty, she told Sieg to change clothes and treat his injuries. She took Mariela, who still looked like her soul had left her body, and gave her a bath before fitting her in a new outfit.

Lynx was laid on Nierenberg's examination table in the section of the living room that had been remodeled. His facial expression struck them as a bit uncomfortable, but there was a serene smile that played across his lips.

Not long after Sieg finished changing, all the members of the Black Iron Freight Corps aside from Dick arrived at Sunlight's Canopy.

All of them were lost for words at the sight of Lynx's body, which was almost unidentifiable. Lieutenant Malraux quickly exchanged looks with the healer, Franz, and the animal trainer, Yuric, then sharply reined in Edgan, who had grabbed the unresisting Sieg.

Franz inspected the wound on Lynx's body, while Yuric disappeared to the rear yard, probably to get information from the raptor.

Edgan had seized Sieg and raised his fist, but he saw the expression on his face and could neither strike him nor lower his fist.

“How...did this happen...?” Edgan spat at Sieg.

Malraux, too, pressed him in a harsh tone. “What of Miss Mariela? She’s safe, I gather.”

“Mariela is unhurt, but she’s in no condition to talk. We’ve lit dream incense to let her sleep. I’ll explain what happened in her place.”

Sieg described the situation: How they’d gone to the twenty-third stratum to gather lunamagia, how the death lizards had made a sudden appearance, how Jay had acted, and how Lynx had...

Yuric returned, and Franz finished his examination. They both corroborated Sieg’s account.

The raptor had witnessed the death lizards and the moment when Jay thrust Mariela in front of him, and it had explained this to Yuric. Well, “explained” would be giving it too much credit. The raptors didn’t have the intellect to use language. It conveyed what happened with a few scattered images.

Yuric understood that the raptor was fearful of the death lizards, angry at Jay, and consumed by sadness: *I’m sad Lynx died. I’m sad Mariela is crying.*

The information from the raptor and Lynx’s wound corroborated Sieg’s story.

“I knew it. We shoulda killed Jay back then,” Yuric snarled.

The other members of the Black Iron Freight Corps, Malraux, Franz, Donnino, and Grandel awkwardly kept their mouths shut, regretting leaving the agitator, Jay, to his own devices.

Dick finally came in, late. His face blanched when he saw the unrecognizable body of Lynx, who’d looked up to him like an older brother. Malraux explained what had happened, and at the part where the death lizards appeared, Dick gritted his teeth and clenched his fists hard enough that they started to bleed.

It’s because we retreated before killing the red dragon...

He never expected their failure with the dragon to be driven home this way. Lynx had lost his life because they couldn’t handle the monster. Burdened by

his comrade's sacrifice and Sieg's narrow escape, Dick could find nothing to say.

"For today, we will take Lynx home. Sieg, I am sure you are exhausted as well, but I assume you understand your duty. Support Miss Mariela," ordered Malraux.

"I will." Sieg bowed his head deeply.

He was profoundly grateful for the man's consideration—and almost trust—in letting him continue to protect Mariela, despite the fact he was worthless...and unable to save Lynx.



09



After the Black Iron Freight Corps departed, Sunlight's Canopy was dim and silent.

The veil of darkness had descended unnoticed, and pale moonlight shone through the skylight that imitated the sacred tree. The rain seemed to have stopped.

Sieg heard a door open on the second floor and hurried up the stairs.

"Did you wake up, Mariela.....?"

Inhaling dream incense through a pipe gave one good dreams, but breathing the smoke directly would induce a short nap. Its effect had worn off. Mariela had gotten out of bed, standing in the corridor looking vacantly at Sieg.

"Sieg, where is Lynx...?"

"Captain Dick and the others took him home."

"Ah..." With her ghostly complexion, Mariela stood still and gazed at Sieg for a short while, then slowly shuffled toward the stairs to the rooftop.

"The rain stopped." Mariela feebly headed up, and Sieg followed her with a blanket.

The spring wind howled.

Up in the stratosphere, the stronger winds were scattering the heavy rainclouds. A while ago, moonlight had poured into Sunlight's Canopy, but at the moment, it was hidden.

On the dark rooftop, Sieg started to worry that the night might steal Mariela away, so he approached her.

"Mariela, nights are still chilly," he said, placing the blanket in his hands around her. In the dark, he couldn't clearly see her face looking up at him, but he could sense her pain. It tore at his heart.

"Sieg, it's..." Mariela opened her mouth.

It was best to listen. To allow her to let it all out. Even though he knew this, Sieg found himself wanting to stop the words that Mariela was about to say. Because he knew she was going to say something that would hurt herself terribly.

"It's my fault."

"No it's not. Not at all."

Lynx's death couldn't possibly have been her fault. Hadn't Mariela herself almost been killed?

"It's because I said I wanted to go herb gathering even though I can't even take care of myself," she started.

"No. You had two B-Rank people with you. It was more than enough for the twenty-third stratum. And we made it back with no problems last time. No one could have expected this surge of monsters."

Sieg said all he could to stop her from blaming herself.

"It's still my fault. I didn't give him potions. I had them, but I wasn't able to use them right away."

"We're the ones who didn't ask for them. Mariela, you had nothing to do with our error in judgment."

Even from an objective standpoint, Mariela did nothing wrong. Sieg and Lynx

were the escorts, and Mariela was the client. The fault lay with them, the ones who had put her in danger, and she was the victim.

But Mariela looked down and quietly shook her head. “No, you’re wrong, Sieg. I... I...”

She raised her head and looked at Sieg. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

“I...dreamed of a quiet city life, and that’s why...”

Tears spilling over, Mariela continued. Lynx’s death had left her with a profound sense of loss—just like the day of the Stampede when she’d lost everything.

“When the Stampede happened, I...escaped alone. I couldn’t save anyone from the monsters, so nobody helped me. Well, that’s not totally accurate. They all let me escape because they knew I couldn’t help even if I stayed behind in the Citadel City. I...escaped alone. I only saved myself.....”

It had been spring then, too.

She’d spent winter in the Fell Forest all alone, where the cold was nearly enough to freeze her heart, too. And just when spring had arrived, the Stampede had taken everything from her.

When she had woken up after her sleep of suspended animation, two hundred years had passed, and nothing was left. Many, many people must have died in the Stampede.

Her new acquaintances, the people and her relationships in the Citadel City, and even the little house in the Fell Forest her master had left her had all been swept away by the flow of time.

She’d thought winter was finally over, but it had just welcomed another autumn, and another winter was on the way again...

But Mariela hadn’t been alone.

Lynx had made sure of that.

Ever since they’d met by chance in the Fell Forest, he’d always been nearby. Even after she had arrived in the Labyrinth City, he showed her around the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion and around the City. He introduced her to his

acquaintances and told trivial stories that made her smile.

And everyone—oh, everyone in the City was so kind. She was a stranger, and they had welcomed her. The regular customers came to Sunlight's Canopy almost every day. She was happy when people came to buy medicine, but she was ecstatic when they told her, "I came to see you."

Even the chemists who were once malicious toward her treated Mariela as a colleague. They taught her valuable information, assuring her they were only repaying a debt. But in all honesty, Mariela felt *she* was the one who owed them.

She made friends: Carol, Elmera, Amber, Sherry, Emily. She loved every single one of them, from the women to the children who she all thought of as her siblings. Mariela had never known how fun it would be to talk and make food with other girls.

And then there was Sieg.

He was always at her side. He was always concerned about her.

Being together with him was almost too comfortable. In fact, when he went to the Ahriman Springs, she was astonished at how used to it she'd become.

"Every day has been so full of fun and joy, I just never thought about it. I knew, and I looked the other way. I thought they'd manage somehow. Just like the injured adventurers who helped work on Sunlight's Canopy. I knew there were people out there having a hard time without potions, but I never came forward..."

She'd realized what the alchemists had done, as they survived the Stampede two hundred years ago in the coffins in the Aguinas family's basement.

She knew they'd risked their lives to keep making potions, yet she hadn't given up her way of life in Sunlight's Canopy.

"Even if I sell potions to the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, they won't reach the masses. I have magical power left over every day after making a hundred high-grade potions, and there are so many people in the Labyrinth City who need them, and I should have been spending all that time in Sunlight's Canopy making more, but I...!"

Only she had survived the Stampede with no consequences, and even in the Labyrinth City, she was the only one of them enjoying her life.

“Back in the Labyrinth, that man told me it was my fault. I bet he realized I’m an alchemist. He knew I only think about myself, that I didn’t reach out to the people I should have been helping.”

She must have thought this was her punishment. Lynx had taken the retribution meant for her.

“That’s why...Lynx...d...died... It has to be my fault,” she finished her monologue, stricken with guilt.

Sieg reflexively hugged her tight. “No. You’re wrong. You’re wrong! It’s not your fault, Mariela. You did nothing wrong. You saved *me*, right?! And those adventurers! You healed their injuries so they could return to the Labyrinth. Your medicine has helped heaps of people! Don’t believe that guy. You don’t have to listen to people who just want to blame their own weakness and misfortunes on others. Mariela. We... Lynx...didn’t save you because you’re an alchemist. Lynx saved you because you’re *you*. As for me, even without potions, even if you never healed me, I would still serve you for as long as I lived. You healed far more than my physical wounds. So, Mariela. Please don’t say that. Don’t blame yourself. Don’t let Lynx’s feelings be for nothing. I... We.....”

Sieg couldn’t tell her what he would have said next.

Because Lynx had said he would confess his love to Mariela when he reached A Rank. And now that day would never come.

“Sieg...” Mariela continued to weep, and Siegmund continued to hold her tight. “Sieg, I...”

Mariela formed the words as if she’d made up her mind.

“I...want to destroy the Labyrinth.”

“Destroy the Labyrinth,” Lynx had said to them at the very end.

If that was his wish, she wanted to make it come true. The labyrinth was what remained of the Stampede two hundred years ago. It took away the Kingdom of Endalsia, the Citadel City, and the place where Mariela belonged, and now it

had taken Lynx, too.

“I’m going to make potions so we can do it. I can’t fight, but I can reveal myself to the Labyrinth Suppression Forces and make potions. I don’t want to lose anyone else.”

Even if it meant she could never return to Sunlight’s Canopy again, if she could just give all she had to annihilate the Labyrinth...

Her determination had become something like a solemn vow in her heart.

Nevertheless, despite her firm resolve, Mariela couldn’t be alone. She was terrified of going all by herself into that dark, grave-like place—it was too similar to when she activated the Magic Circle of Suspended Animation under the fear of impending death.

“Please, Sieg. Don’t...don’t leave me all alone...,” she begged in a strained voice.

Her entreaty gently bound Sieg to her.

“Of course, Mariela. I’m yours. All I have is yours...”

It wasn’t a slave Order. She hadn’t put the slightest bit of magical power into it. She’d only ever given him a single Order. *“Don’t tell anyone I’m an alchemist.”* That was it.

Mariela had saved both Sieg’s life and his soul and expected nothing in return. She was content with the familial affection that she received in her quiet life, and she sincerely wished for Sieg to be free.

Oh, how he longed for her. How he wanted her to yearn for him.

But Sieg had no say in whatever Mariela desired.

Even if she came to him only for some temporary respite from a deep wound, he wouldn’t mind as long as he could feel her warmth in his arms like this.

Mariela shook feebly with sobs, and Siegmund held her close.

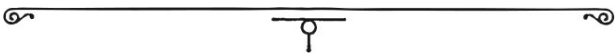
Was the moon peeking out from between the clouds waning or waxing?

The wind swept the clouds together, and the last beam of moonlight was lost behind them.

Their night quietly wore on in darkness.

EPILOGUE

A Fire to See You Off





01



Lynx's corpse was sent off in a blaze on a hill east-northeast of the Labyrinth City.

The City faced the Fell Forest and contained a labyrinth inside it. If a person's remains were buried, they would be devoured by monsters or taken by the Labyrinth. Even in death, that person wouldn't be able to escape from the monsters. That was why they were burned with fire magic until not even the bones remained.

Fuel was precious in the Labyrinth City, and ordinary households even used magical tools and lifestyle magic to cook with fire. Firewood wasn't necessary in funeral rites thanks to fire magic. However, it was believed that piling the wood and sending the deceased off with a towering blaze would allow that person's spirit to be released from the corruption of this world, ascend into the heavens, and return to a better world—the ley line.

An altar had been set up on this hill to see off the departed, and people had gathered to honor Lynx.

"Make your offerings." In charge of leading the ceremony, Dick gave the signal for the attendees to offer flames to the firewood.

"Daddy, Lynx is gonna burn..., " Emily protested.

Emily was still young. This may have been her first time saying good-bye to a close friend. Tears tumbled down her cheeks as she clung to her father, the owner of the Yagu Drawbridge Pavilion, and endured the grief of parting.

"Emily, we're lucky to be able to have a memorial service for him in this city. In many cases, it's hard to recover a part of the body. Didn't Lynx play with you? Now let's send him off."

The owner led Emily to the altar, and she used lifestyle magic to offer a small flame. They weren't the only ones: Ghark, Amber, Merle, Caroline, Gordon and

the other two dwarves had all gathered here to say their final good-byes to Lynx. And of course, every member of the Black Iron Freight Corps was present; all of them had risked their lives alongside him over a long period of time.

If someone couldn't conjure a flame, they could use lifestyle magic. The gratitude and sorrow of those offering fire nourished the spirits of flames, who released the deceased from their body and the fetters of this world. The Black Iron Freight Corps and the attendees had gathered the wood for pile, and the ceremonial fire formed a pillar high enough to scorch the clouds hanging heavy and low overhead.

"Thanks for everything." "Thank you." "My gratitude." "We'll miss you."

They expressed their appreciation for the time they spent with their friend, and the sorrow of a final parting.

What the attendees said to each other—*It was a good funeral; I'm sure he was happy to hear us wish him well*—was largely for themselves, to fill the gaping holes in their hearts. The words may have been the manifestation of their desire to stay with the deceased just a little longer after his passing, even though they'd sent him into the heavens to return to the ley line.

The flames weakened, and although the attendees began to head for home one after another, Mariela and Sieg stood motionlessly at the altar. The members of the Black Iron Freight Corps did, too. Even a certain raptor silently saw Lynx off from a distance. At last, the firewood burned out, and the wind carried away the remaining ashes. Mariela tightly grasped the trick pendant that Lynx had given her.

"Miss Mariela, shall we go?" Malraux asked, and she nodded. Mariela and Sieg pulled their hoods over their heads, low enough to hide their eyes. After Malraux and Dick escorted them to an iron carriage, they headed to the estate of Margrave Schutzenwald.

Mariela recalled the smoke rising high into the sky and Lynx's final facial expression.

She still couldn't believe she would never again hear their silly banter when he came to Sunlight's Canopy every day.

Lynx, I promise to destroy the Labyrinth... Mariela gripped Lynx's pendant as she cemented this wish into her heart.

"Destroy the Labyrinth," he had said—for Mariela to smile and live as an ordinary girl. This wasn't what he would have wanted.

If he could see Mariela now, he would not be pleased in the least.

But Lynx could no longer tell her anything. The armored carriage bearing Mariela and Sieg passed through the gate of Margrave Schutzenwald, and the tall, heavy doors thudded closed behind them.

The armored carriage would never bear Mariela and Sieg to Sunlight's Canopy through these doors again.

"Please take me to General Leonhardt."

Mariela and Sieg had paid a visit to the Black Iron Freight Corps the afternoon after that fateful night. In her hands, Mariela clutched the magical contract she'd signed with the Corps. A contract could be voided by burning it along with any duplicates in a designated process.

She had been selling potions through the Black Iron Freight Corps, receiving protection and confidentiality as part of the compensation. If Mariela entered Leonhardt's jurisdiction and dealt directly with him, the contract would need to be annulled. The Corps would be handsomely compensated for bringing them the alchemist, which would cover their losses once they stopped acting as middlemen. If that wasn't enough, she would pay them the money she'd saved up to this point.

And she wanted to meet Lynx one more time.

Lynx's room in the Black Iron Freight Corps' base was surprisingly dreary, and she could just picture him there stretched out with a sheepish smile on his face.

"In that case, we'll go together," Malraux and Dick responded after listening to Mariela.

Lynx had been more than just a fellow Corps member to Dick and Malraux. He was their comrade who'd gone through the Fell Forest with them more times than they could count. He was their subordinate who excelled at collecting

information and scouting; he was their lovable friend who admired them and called them “Captain” and “Lieutenant”; he was their family.

Dick knew the death lizards had surged out of a shallow stratum, a direct reaction to the Forces’ failure to subjugate the red dragon. Malraux knew Lynx’s last smile at once showed contentment of protecting someone important to him and sadness at parting.

Both Dick and Malraux understood that blaming Mariela for wanting to gather herbs, Sieg for failing to protect Lynx, and Jay for being a fool was just shifting the responsibility for the sake of their own peace of mind.

Dick had failed to bring down the red dragon. Although Malraux hadn’t been there, he was the one who’d brought Jay into the Black Iron Freight Corps. They understood there was something they needed to do more than blame their own folly.

Avenge Lynx by destroying the Labyrinth.

Every single member of the Black Iron Freight Corps had come to share this goal.

The Black Iron Freight Corps was a transportation group with pride in their strength that enabled them to travel through the Fell Forest to the imperial capital and the Labyrinth City. However, that didn’t mean every member had the ability to fight on the front lines in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces. Many of them could only demonstrate their true talents precisely because they were in the Corps.

At the same time, they’d been transporting all kinds of goods that the Labyrinth City had lacked for many years now. Neither the City nor the Labyrinth Suppression Forces could afford to lose them. All the members of the Corps stayed up that whole night discussing how supporting the Forces from behind the scenes was still adjacent to destroying the Labyrinth.

From this discussion, they decided for Dick and Malraux—who had once served as commanding officers—to return to the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, and for the remaining members to continue their activities in the Black Iron Freight Corps. Although those who couldn’t directly avenge Lynx by annihilating the Labyrinth knew it was for the best, they were still overcome with regret.

Dick and Malraux let those feelings motivate them to destroy the Labyrinth with renewed purpose.

Mariela and Sieg visited them on the very day they'd planned to go to the Labyrinth Suppression Forces and convey their wishes to return.

Still, despite their plans, they couldn't afford to take the sole alchemist in the Labyrinth City to the Forces without any advance notice. After discussing with Mariela and Sieg, they agreed to seek an audience with Leonhardt after Lynx's funeral.



02



When Mariela and the others visited the household of Margrave Schutzenwald, they were treated as guests of honor and ushered into the drawing room, where General Leonhardt and Lieutenant General Weishardt were waiting.

"Welcome, Lady Alchemist. I am Leonhardt, general of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces."

"H-hi. Nice to meet you. I'm Mariela."

"I'm sorry to hear about Lynx, but we will make certain to fulfill his last wish!"

"Um, Lord Weishardt. Did you know I was an alchemist from the Labyrinth City—and not the imperial capital—from the get-go?"

"Naturally. I heard your most recent expedition was particularly dangerous, and I feel personally responsible. We will be more diligent in keeping you safe from now on. However, I'm grateful for the opportunity to directly consult with you. I hope we can continue to work together."

"Um, yes. Me too."

"There are many things I'd like to discuss about the future, but first, why don't we deepen our fellowship as comrades in the fight against the Labyrinth?"

Leonhardt said, showing everyone to a splendid dining hall.

Mariela had never, ever, seen a feast like this one, with dishes crowding the dining table. Dick and Malraux had seats at the table, of course, but even Sieg, a slave who was normally prohibited from entering such a room, was invited to join.

“Please relax and enjoy yourselves.”

After Leonhardt led them in a short toast, a female servant served Mariela all the food she could eat. It was customary to have food brought out in courses, but they had arranged it as a buffet style for guests to enjoy the food without dithering.

“Come to think of it, I hear there is scorched earth in the Fell Forest where vegetation still fails to grow. I heard of a great mage—the Sage of Calamity—from the time of the Stampede, who went alone to defeat powerful monsters and reduce the damage to the kingdom. Do you know anything about this, Lady Mariela?”

“No. I don’t really leave the Labyrinth City. And I don’t know what went on back then, either...”

Mariela had escaped the monsters via the Magic Circle of Suspended Animation before they reached the Kingdom of Endalsia. She knew no details of the Stampede. As she hesitated, Malraux and Dick answered in her place.

“Dick and I have seen it. We pushed our way to that area before in order to earn start-up capital for the Black Iron Freight Corps.”

“It was quite a sight. The ground melted and hardened again.”

“Hmm. But people were able to escape the Stampede and survive because the sage slaughtered formidable monsters and dampened its momentum. You could even owe the creation of the Labyrinth City to this person.”

“Indeed, brother. And now we have a sage known as Lady Mariela. Let us make defeating the Labyrinth and cutting a path to the future a reality.”

Raising Mariela up to the same level as a sage and giving her a more than proper reception revealed Leonhardt’s intentions. All the dishes he served were

divine, and even the conversation was steered to topics that were familiar to Mariela. Even if she wasn't able to keep up, Dick and Malraux jumped in and calmly continued the discussion. However, Mariela's expression was clouded. They could have been the most considerate people in the world—or trying to distract her from her thoughts—but she couldn't shake off the idea that if she'd come here sooner, Lynx wouldn't have died.

“Let's discuss the details tomorrow. For today, just rest and relax.”

When dinner was over, Weishardt led Mariela and the others to the back of the estate.

The estate of Margrave Schutzenwald had undergone multiple renovations and expansions to keep up with the trends of the respective period. The oldest part at the heart of the estate was thought to have been built over a hundred years ago. As the group went farther back, the beautiful wallpaper decorating the interior changed to solid stonework walls—similar to Mariela's home—and after they passed through several doors, they came to a staircase leading underground.

A cellar, huh? I knew it... Mariela's stomach slightly sank.

She had expected this. She was the only alchemist in the City. Shutting her away in a cellar was the most reliable way to hide and protect her from both monsters and people. She'd just churn out potions in a dim cellar, never to be blessed with the warmth of the sun nor the gentle moonlight again. She knew this was going to happen.

Even if she could never return to Sunlight's Canopy again, as long as she could demolish the Labyrinth ...

She had come to General Leonhardt, knowing that she would have to do or die. Faltering now was unacceptable.

Mariela plodded after Weishardt.

The Schutzenwald family had a vast cellar with small rooms running from one end of the corridor to the other.

The hallway itself must have been a bastion against monster invasion with doors installed at fixed intervals. These doors stood wide open, not hindering

the group as they passed through, but when they were all the way inside, the doors would probably be tightly shut on her.

The thick doors partitioning the corridor made the place like an inescapable prison to Mariela.

They proceeded farther in, one step at a time. Weishardt was in front. Dick and Malraux brought up the rear, sandwiching Sieg and Mariela.

The group arrived at the innermost room.

“This is it.”

A soldier appearing to belong to the Labyrinth Suppression Forces stood in front of the door and bowed his head to Mariela.

“He will be our intermediary,” introduced Weishardt.

Mariela lightly bowed her head. Was this man the only one keeping watch? The soldier appeared nervous as he bowed back.

“The preparations are complete. Please come inside,” he said and opened the door.

Mariela was dumbstruck at the sight in front of them.

“Preparations...? What kind of...”

The room was small enough that it felt cramped with five people in it. There were no beds, shelves, desks, or even chairs provided. There wasn't even a single mattress on the floor, and the walls had rustic lighting for illumination with no decoration. The room had no preparations for a monster attack, let alone for people to live in.

More importantly...

“Grar-rar,” yipped the raptor that had saved Mariela and lost half its tail.

It poked its head out from a hole in the floor with stairs leading down as if to say, “You're late!”

She never thought that even the residence of Margrave Schutzenwald would connect to the underground Aqueduct. Well, of course an aristocrat's estate would have multiple evacuation routes.

“We hadn’t been able to use this since the slimes began multiplying in the Aqueduct, but mid-grade monster-warding potions are a wonderful thing,” Weishardt started. “As only those with potions can pass through, you’ll not find an evacuation route safer than this one. My brother wishes you to use it to travel to the base of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, too, though that may be for efficiency’s sake.”

Weishardt guffawed, easing the tension. “We have confirmed a route to the cellar of Sunlight’s Canopy. The cellar in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces’ base and the second floor of the Labyrinth are connected to the Aqueduct, so you may move undetected to both their base and this estate.”

Beaming, Malraux offered a mid-grade monster-warding potion.

Dick remained silent as he sprinkled one over himself and immediately went down the stairs to check the safety of the route.

“Whaaaaaat?”

Mariela and Sieg exchanged looks.

She was beginning to think that working toward subjugating the Labyrinth with the Labyrinth Suppression Forces wouldn’t change her life in Sunlight’s Canopy at all.



03



Pitter-patter. The rain fell without stopping.

The weather hadn’t cleared up in days. From the blanket of clouds fell a steady drizzle that cast a gloomy pall over the Labyrinth standing in the center of the City—and the City itself facing the Fell Forest. The drenched stone walls made the muted, gray colors more prominent, as though the entire City were in mourning.

“Mariela, your new detergent for indoor drying is very popular! Everyone is raving about how it wards off that weird smell. I had no idea that the rainy

season caused these kinds of concerns!”

Caroline tried her best to sound peppier than usual as she spoke to Mariela.

“Mm...I’m glad I helped a little...,” Mariela muttered back. Everything around her was doom and gloom. She didn’t even lift her head.

“Mariela! I’ve got brand-new treats for you! They’re amazing! They’re not made from yagu milk. I used cheese from cow’s milk, which means they’ve got a rich flavor without that gamy funk. *And* they practically melt in your mouth. If you eat these, I think you’ll melt from inside out,” Merle babbled, bringing with her hard candy made from milk.

Cow milk was a luxury in the Labyrinth City. There wasn’t enough land to raise animals, after all. Meanwhile, yagus were content with simple feed, were capable of carrying people and baggage, and provided meat and milk, which meant very few livestock were raised exclusively for food. They only graced the dining tables of the nobility.

This, too, was special candy sent from the Schutzenwald family.

“Oh... I shouldn’t gain weight... And I can’t diet in the Labyrinth anymore...”

Gloomy-gloom-gloom. Mariela tightly gripped the hem of her tunic.

She remembered running up the stratum stairs in the Labyrinth, Lynx chasing after her, and her eyes started to well with tears.

Merle shot a look at Gordon that said, “Damn it! Do something!” and he began wiggling his rump back and forth in his chair in a little dance.

“M-Mari! Look here! Today’s a nice humid day to do this. And hey, the chair’ll look good as new!”

It was a very forced change of topic. What would she do if only the seat of the chair looked brand-spanking-new?

Was he polishing it for Weishardt? The lieutenant general might not have made any progress in his relationship with Caroline, but he would have already had an encounter with Gordon’s rump—even though they’d never had a conversation before and their social positions differed.

“...Gordon, wipe the chair before you go home, okay?”

Gloomy-gloomy-gloom-gloom. Gloomy-gloom-gloomy-gloom.

Mariela's gloom had risen a level. She silently pointed to a cleaning cloth.

"Mariela... A package for you..."

Gloom. Gloom. Sieg's melancholy seemed to be at a higher saturation than Mariela's. He poked his head from the door connecting to the living area.

By nature, Sieg was a more sensitive person than Mariela. The situation with Lynx had heightened his natural tenderheartedness and dampened the mood even more than it already was.

"Okay. I'll go now, Sieg... I'm sorry, Amber, please watch the shop for me..."

Gloom-gloom-gloom. Gloom-gloom-gloom.

"Got it. I'm sure if you use a nice soap, your mood will change," said Amber as she saw off Mariela to the atelier.

Without Mariela and Sieg present, it was somehow easier to breathe in Sunlight's Canopy.

"Mariela has suffered so much. It's heartbreaking. But..." With great sadness, Caroline gazed at the door the pair had disappeared through.

"Yes. I understand she's having a tough time. But how do I put it...?"

"She's dampening the mood so much, she could sprout mushrooms."

"Yeah."

Everyone present agreed with the mushroom comment.

Death was a constant companion in the Labyrinth City, and it wasn't uncommon for people to leave this world at a young age, as had Lynx. It was a very tragic thing, but everyone lived with this fact in their minds—spending your time with others, and others spending their time with you. The survivors in the Labyrinth City believed their lives were paying tribute to the departed.

Of course, after Lynx's death, Mariela and Sieg began to satisfy their own needs. No one knew what that was, but they did know the two were desperately trying.

However, the way they immersed themselves in their grief, licking each

other's wounds, they could have been protagonists of a tragic play.

In other ways, a mushrooming duo had been formed.

"Sieg, are these all the materials we have? I can still make more. I still have magical power left!"

"Mariela, don't overwork yourself. Between the high-grade and high-grade specialized potions that you made yesterday, we've gotten over two hundred, right? If something happened to you, I..."

Gloomity-gloomity-gloom. Gloom-gloom-gloom.

Even though the magical ventilation tool in the atelier was chugging on at full throttle, the mood was damper than Slaken, the mucus-spitting synthetic slime made mostly of liquid. It really did look like mushrooms were going to sprout any second now.

"Whoa! A new kind of mushroom! Free materials!" Mariela might have shouted if she was feeling herself.

But the conversation now would be much different.

"Oh, materials...", Mariela would likely say. "If I don't make potions, I'll...!"

Cue more mushrooms and Sieg crying her name: "Mariela!"

Mariela and Sieg spent the night they lost Lynx huddled together, but their relationship had hardly made any progress.

Sieg had thought of Lynx as his dearest friend, and his death was certainly painful. The grief from losing him squeezed at his heart even now. When they confronted the death lizards, his desire to help Lynx hadn't been a lie. His own weakness and cowardice still overwhelmed him, making him feel as though his knees might buckle under him.

But at the same time, he had feared Lynx would rob him of his time with Mariela, take away the place where he belonged. It didn't matter where the relationship between the three of them ended up: he was firmly committed to serving Mariela. But if Mariela had chosen Lynx, he wasn't confident he could have given them his blessing from the bottom of his heart. There was a piece of him, deep inside, that was relieved he wouldn't have to part with her...even

though he was aware that this was extremely cowardly and underhanded.

On the night of Lynx's passing, Sieg didn't allow himself to experience that jumble of pain, relief, and anguish or to wallow in his own suffering. Thinking of himself was secondary. If he didn't put the person who Lynx lost his life for first, he couldn't even allow himself to remain at her side.

That was why Siegmund had chosen to hold Mariela close on that night on the rooftop of Sunlight's Canopy, pushing his crushing shame into the corners of his heart.

"Don't leave me all alone."

Mariela had looked as though she could vanish at any second, and Siegmund listened to her express something that could be taken as a confession of love. But she was a lone girl torn up by the grief and slowly slipping away; it wasn't as if she had actively chosen Siegmund as the one person she wanted to be with. He knew that, yet he'd felt a fire burning in his wounds, a painful sweetness that throbbed in time with his heart.

Before he fell into slavery, he'd done his share of messing around. As a sleazebag who'd prioritized himself over anyone else, he had experience sleeping with submissive women. The dark sweetness from these memories crossed his mind. The warmth of the girl in his arms made him think: *What if?*

After expressing her near confession, Mariela cried and cried and cried enough for a flood. Sieg had given her water, worried she would completely dry out, but it only seemed to make her cry more. In fact, she had wept so much that he thought she must be shedding a lifetime's worth of tears. And finally, as if all that crying had exhausted her, she fell asleep in Sieg's arms.

And it was a sound sleep.

He could hardly believe the combination of hysterical crying, nose blowing, and deep sleeping would be the clincher.

A woman rarely rubbed her eyes after a good cry to prevent her face from becoming puffy. Even if she cured it with a low-grade potion, she only showed her tear-stained face to the one she wanted to see it so that no one else would know she cried.

However, the eyes of the girl sleeping in Sieg's arms had swelled up, and even her nose had become a deep crimson. She looked just a smidge like a needle ape, giving him a set of indescribable feelings.

...Anyway, I should put her to bed in her room...

Although she was wrapped in a blanket, the night was chilly. He couldn't let her catch a cold. Sieg held Mariela in his left arm and stood to leave the roof.

He happened to look up and see the moon had appeared in a gap between the clouds.

He stretched his hand toward the hazy moonlit sky.

The thin crescent moon resembled a bow, a long way from becoming full, and its light was faint and unreliable.

Sieg faced the moon with his outstretched hand, but the only thing caught in his fingers was the wind whistling through them. They couldn't hold on to anything.

Although many days had passed since that night, Siegmund and Mariela continued to lean on each other while holding on to the grief of losing Lynx. They were far from fully understanding it or processing their complex emotions.

Weishardt felt perplexed by this, too.

He'd heard the aftereffects of failing to subjugate the red dragon had put the alchemist in danger. It had not been disclosed to the public that routine Labyrinth operations were taking place under the Labyrinth Suppression Forces' base. Even if there were a possibility of strong enemies appearing in a shallow stratum at the time of defeat, there had been no measures taken to prohibit entry to the Labyrinth in case of emergency. But considering the importance of the alchemist, a squad's worth of soldiers should have accompanied her at all times, even if that meant they had to give a forceful reason for it. At the very least, they would have known what the Forces were doing and told her to gather herbs on a different day so she wouldn't enter the Labyrinth during a subjugation involving unknown factors.

Under normal circumstances, they would have brought Nierenberg along, and Weishardt had expected two adventurers on the verge of A Rank to be strong

enough to handle any problems. His attention had been divided by the Forces' fight against the red dragon, and he felt his ignorance of the alchemist's actions was his own blunder.

As a result, the Black Iron Freight Corps lost a talented young man protecting her.

Dick and Malraux had originally been members of the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, and they had considerable experience in losing comrades in the line of duty. It wasn't that they'd gotten used to losing cherished friends, but they'd learned how to come to grips with death, understand the cause, and move on. Even more so for Leonhardt and Weishardt. They'd been under the impression the alchemist was the same.

He'd invited her to the estate to explain and apologize for the situation regarding the red dragon subjugation and to renew his resolution to move forward together. However, the alchemist looked haggard and showed no sign of overcoming the death of the young man named Lynx.

It would be easy to take all the blame and express the connection between Lynx's death and the red dragon subjugation. He could have explained how he'd failed in his duty to inform her of that possibility and prevent her from entering the Labyrinth. However, Weishardt knew that wouldn't help her overcome grief.

The subjugation of the Labyrinth would continue. Dick and Malraux had declared they would participate. They could die in battle, and her acquaintances in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces she had developed a strategy with could all perish, too. If she blamed herself and wasted away every time, she wouldn't be able to endure the struggle from here on out.

Sending Mariela and Sieg back to Sunlight's Canopy wasn't because the place had been set up with a sufficient defense system. It was because making potions around the clock in a subpar environment wouldn't lead to productivity. What he hoped for from the alchemist wasn't just an increase in the number of potions, but for her to lead them to a clue in capturing the stratum with her knowledge and ideas.

She couldn't make the special-grade "Ice Spirit's Protection" potions yet. They

hadn't obtained the red dragon scales for the "Demi-Dragon Medicine," the polymorph medicine that could transform one into something like a demi-dragon and allow them to function in harsh environmental conditions.

Currently, Mariela still hadn't processed Lynx's death. All she did was gloomily make potions. At first, when the Labyrinth Suppression Forces brought in a large bushel of gathered lunamagia, she repeatedly ran out of magical power and collapsed until the lunamagia was all used up. Abusing herself wouldn't allow the departed to rest in peace.

Which means she doesn't put up a front... She needs time.

With this in mind, Leonhardt and Weishardt had deliberately tried to make trifling conversation as they sat at dinner with her. First, she needed to get her smile back. If she sorted out her thoughts, she would start to stand on her own two feet again.

Now, what's to be done...?

Weishardt was lost in thought. With the deliveries, they had been able to maintain sufficient stock of high-grade potions up to this point. However, he had no bright ideas regarding the red dragon. They'd found a means of surviving through Elmera's husband, Voyd, neutralizing the dragon's breath. But when Weishardt had indirectly asked for his help, he turned him down. Even if the Forces were protected and managed to pull the dragon to the ground, they had no way to finish it off.

Currently, the only measure the Labyrinth Suppression Forces could take was to send soldiers to each stratum in the Labyrinth to reduce its power and prevent its growth even just a little.

In short, everything was at a stalemate.



04



It was a land of death where earth and stone had melted and hardened—

where plants could no longer grow.

Resembling the fifty-sixth stratum impeding the Labyrinth Suppression Forces, this place lay deep in the Fell Forest.

It was one of the sites of a bloody battle during the Stampede that had happened two hundred years ago.

The power wielded by the Sage of Calamity had alighted in this ravine of the Fell Forest, burned the heavens, melted the earth, and consigned the A-rank monsters that roamed here to oblivion. It had been said that the momentum of the monsters attacking the Kingdom of Endalsia had been greatly reduced from this.

A handful of people had managed to survive. The Schutzenwald family's troops had arrived to provide relief immediately after the Stampede and managed to secure an area for people to live.

Even now, there were traces of the battle that remained. Although the area of scorched earth had shrunk in size over the years, it remained a land of death where plants didn't grow. Two hundred years ago, it was a dangerous area inhabited by A-Rank earth dragons; the only people who had been here were high-ranking adventurers like Dick.

Not even the Fell Forest was spared from the drizzling rain that continued to fall.

Since there were no trees to block it from the barren land, the rain whittled down the melted and hardened earth little by little at its weak points, cracking rocks. After being weathered by the wind and water, the place would probably eventually allow normal growth again.

In an area near the forest, piles of fallen leaves had rotted and turned into dirt, fallen seeds were sprouting, and the forest was spreading. Tall trees had sprung up, and a sudden bolt of lightning struck one of them.

The tree split and collapsed as it burned. The impact of lightning and the dull thud of a collapsing tree weren't terribly uncommon. Other than the birds who couldn't fly away in the rain, huddling together in the shelter of the trees, no one made a fuss over the lightning's impact. Nothing living in the Fell Forest

noticed a hole had opened in a section of the ground from the fallen tree.

Ba-dum.

A stopped heart sprang to life.

Congeaed blood began to circulate again; lungs sought oxygen.

A wheezy inhalation sucked in a massive amount of dust.

“Hack, cough, cough, gack.”

It hurt to breathe, and a pounding headache signaled a lack of oxygen and a need for air—fresh air.

“Ventilate.”

The one waking up at the bottom of an open hole brought in fresh air before reflecting, mind still foggy from the lack of oxygen.

Now, how did I end up here, again...?

“Drops of Life.”

Forming a makeshift bowl with their hands, the awoken drew droplets of water glowing white, gulping it down in one go. With clearer thoughts now, their cells began to wake up one by one, strength settling back in the body.

The awoken used a burst of flame magic to widen the hole in the ceiling before lightly leaping out of the underground cellar to find the Fell Forest and familiar charred earth—the land of death.

“Swallowed up by the forest, huh? I guess I slept for a while...”

As they scratched their heads and shook off the little mound of dust, earth dragons caught wind of magical power emanating from a human and cut paths through the trees to find the source.

Boom. Boom. The earth dragons advanced. They had to be over three yards tall. With their long tails, the dragons had the appearance of enlarged raptors, except they walked on four legs. All the legs were thick, short, and sluggish, but they carried an impressive mass, and their skin was like steel armor.

This was the Fell Forest. Since all the monsters left their meat behind there, bodies did not vanish even in death. If someone could obtain the materials of a

sturdy, tough earth dragon, they could procure riches galore.

In fact, before the establishment of the Black Iron Freight Corps, Dick and Malraux had challenged earth dragons here, selling the materials they obtained to start the Corps. Of course, the creatures were foes worthy of their rank, and it would be impossible even for Dick to challenge multiple dragons at the same time. They had hunted the dragons with Malraux skillfully leading, staying in contact, and ensuring they fought one-on-one.

There were three of these earth dragons. Drooling over the tasty morsel, they surrounded the human.

“Ah! That’s right! I forgot about these...though I thought there were more of them.” The human remained unconcerned. One of the earth dragons looked at its prey. Its eyes shone faintly, just before stone spears blasted out of the ground.

“Stone Lance.”

It was earth magic controlled by the dragon. The creature wasn’t nimble, but it could use this type of magic to catch its prey before greedily devouring it. It was a formidable enemy with solid defense that was hard to breach. It wasn’t just hardy; its magic attacks were quick as well.

But the awoken nimbly launched into the air, alighted on the tip of a Stone Lance, and complained. “Booooring.”

Oh, right. Back then, these dragons used to make these lances snap and crack from the ground, too. It had been so annoying, the awoken *melted* everything in one go.

“O flames, my kin, sing and dance together. Summon Dancing Flames,” called out the awoken, the Sage of Calamity.

It was as though all heat in the atmosphere had condensed. Flames shot forth in a blazing vortex, sweeping up the stone spears and the earth dragons. Even with the scales they were so proud of, the swirling flames had sapped oxygen from the air, and the heat was so intense that nothing could escape being burned. Surrounded by the flames, the Sage of Calamity watched the earth dragons fall to the ground with strangled cries of death.

Twisting an arm in the air—perhaps performing a dance, or perhaps conducting the flames—the Sage beckoned the pillar to vanish without a trace. All that remained were the smoldering earth dragons letting off puffs of smoke.

“Aw, man. I overdid it. Can’t eat them now.”

At the time of the Stampede, the earth dragons had invaded a safe house, which caused the Sage to lose control and launch magic at full power. The Sage’s house had been razed to the ground—and the earth dragons with it—but the sturdy cellar had been unharmed. The cellar had been wonderfully constructed. The Sage was quite proud of it, even though it was the work of a carpenter.

Back then, the Sage had scrambled to the cellar after nearly exhausting their magic. Today, they had tried to use a relatively weak fire, but keeping fire in check was hard. Good meat was rare to come by, but it wasn’t edible like this.

For the Sage, it was hard to handle a small fire for a lantern, which had been why there had been a lantern with plenty of oil installed in the cellar with a Magic Circle of Suspended Animation. It was perfect.

“Hmm? Wait, the lantern’s...flame? Ohhh...” With a miserable groan, the Sage of Calamity sank into a crouch.

The awoken normally spent their time outdoors punching enemies, so they forgot—lighting a fire in a locked room would just deplete all the oxygen. Even when the Stampede was over, the Sage must have continued to sleep indefinitely until the melted, hardened entrance had opened with time.

“How long was I asleep.....?!”

The Sage of Calamity’s grief echoed fruitlessly through the forest.

This misery lasted about ten seconds. Unlike a certain alchemist, the Sage recovered quickly.

“Oh well. She’s probably up, too. I’m starved! Guess I’ll go home for once!”

After stripping the magical stones and materials from the earth dragons—with the ease of plucking flowers from the side of a road—the Sage of Calamity began walking toward the Labyrinth City.

The rain had stopped, and sunlight shone through a gap in the clouds.

Appendix





Yuric

? Age: 15

The animal trainer of the Black Iron Freight Corps, with a thick accent and features characteristic of a different race. Under Yuric's direction, even the friendliest raptors turn into frightening monsters with a terrific "Grar," fearlessly plunging through the forest infested with beasts. Hailing from the slums in the imperial capital, Yuric loathes humans and prefers animals. The only people Yuric is vulnerable around are Franz the foster parent, the other members of the Black Iron Freight Corps, and Mariela, who's won over the affections of the raptors. To all others, this animal trainer's bluntness can be hard to understand.



Edgan

♂ Age: 24

The dual wielder of the Black Iron Freight Corps. He's handsome and possesses the strength of a B-Ranker. Forever alone, he's always on the hunt for a girlfriend—but he's just too much of a womanizer and a dunce to be in a relationship. Although he developed a friendship with Sieg and Lynx from their time together in the Ahriman Springs, he's never invited to fun events with Mariela, including trips to beaches and hot springs. No one can guess how *Erotigan* will mature moving forward, seeing as he's busy catching eyes with needle apes.



Merle

♀ Age: ?

The owner of Merle's Spices. She serves as the coordinator between the local housewives. If you ask her, she's forever twenty years old. Under the guise of the "boss of the housewife intelligence network" who loves coarse sugar and spicy gossip, she actually serves as an intelligence agent for the family of Margrave Schutzenwald. But although gathering and managing information in the Labyrinth City is her forte, she isn't deceitful. She leaves her shop to her assistant and frequents Sunlight's Canopy.



Gordon

♂ Age: 58

A dwarven carpenter who is thick everywhere—from beard to eyebrows to body. He constantly quarrels with his self-professed architect son, Johan, but he recognizes Johan's abilities and coordinates with him to perform quality work. Along with the glass artisan dwarf Ludan, the two of them remodeled Sunlight's Canopy into a shop that might be an apothecary or a teahouse, but no one can say for sure. The dwarven trio can be found indulging in tea and sunshine at Sunlight's Canopy.



Sherry Nierenberg

♀ Age: **12**

Daughter of Medical Engineer Jack Nierenberg. She's sociable, kind, helpful, beautiful, and extremely popular among her bigger friends in the Labyrinth Suppression Forces. Once severely burned by slime acid, her face has recovered back to normal, and she enjoys spending time with Emily, Pallois, and Elio in Sunlight's Canopy. It's said that she doesn't resemble Jack at all—other than her black hair—but at times, her smile shows inklings of her father's.



Voyd Seele

♂ Age: 37

Husband to Elmera and father to Pallois and Elio. He appears to be a calm character who serves as a househusband in place of his busy wife. As for his true identity... He's often seen praising Elmera for her "electrifying" nature, but that might just be the pins and needles shooting through his body. The couple have an extremely good relationship, flirting shamelessly in front of others. Captain Dick envies them because Amber is strictly against PDA.

Master* Mariela's Alchemy Recipes

High-Grade Edition

* Unofficial title



High-Grade Heal Potion

From major injuries to those pesky scars!

A real testimony to the restorative power of potions.
Even effective on weakened people who can't be cured with healing magic.

【Ingredients】 Lunamagia: An herb that grows in the light of moonstones on the shores of subterranean lakes.

Curique: A medicinal herb that's effective for injuries and can be found just about anywhere.

Mandragora: A root in the shape of a person.

Ogre dates: Available for purchase in dried form. Sweet and tasty.

Treant fruit: The fruit of tree monsters. Cheaper to use a substitute made from thirteen different medicinal herbs.

Arawne root and leaf: A poisonous medicinal herb. Requires a process to remove the poison.

Oil from pickling venomous glands of a parasite leech: Used to regenerate blood. Looks very gross.

【Quantity】
(per potion)

Lunamagia: 1 bundle; curique: 1 handful;
mandragora: 1 piece; ogre date: 1 half;
treant fruit: 1 half; arawne root and leaf: 1 pinch;
venomous gland oil: 1 drop

High-Grade Cure Potion

A must-have for when you're petrified!

A cure potion that has many uses.

Lund is the best at purifying anything, no matter the type of poison.

【Ingredients】 Lund petioles: An herb with floating petioles that is found in poisonous swamps. Must be reeled in to obtain.

Lunamagia, curique, mandragora, ogre dates, treant fruit, arawne root and leaf, venomous glands of a parasite leech.

【Quantity】 (per potion) Lund petiole: 1 half; lunamagia: 1 bundle; curique, mandragora, ogre dates, treant fruit, arawne root and leaf, venomous glands: Half the amount used in high-grade heal potions.

High-Grade Specialized Potion for Muscle Tissue

Exceptionally effective for missing limbs!

A welcome friend to anyone who's ever been chomped by a monster. Instead of specializing in a particular function, it has the equivalent recovery effect of a special-grade potion.

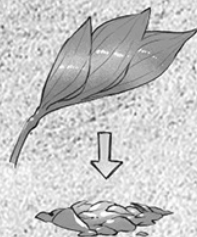
【Ingredients】 Nigill bud: Buds collected right before they break through the snow. Just as the buds worm up from the ground, they regenerate sinews in their wormy way.

Lunamagia, curique, mandragora, ogre dates, treant fruit, arawne root and leaf, venomous glands of a parasite leech.

【Quantity】 (per potion) Nigill bud: 1 bud; lunamagia, curique, mandragora, ogre dates, treant fruit, arawne root and leaf, venomous glands: The same amount used in high-grade heal potions.

How to Create High-Grade Potions

《1.Extracting Lunamagia》



1-1

Pulverize the lunamagia after thoroughly drying it. The temperature should be the same as the temperature at which lunamagia grows, which is 50 to 52 degrees Fahrenheit. Lightly decompress before pulverizing it as finely as possible.

1-2

Place in ice and extract it below freezing. As a solid, it will take time to extract. Spritz water mixed with *Drops of Life*, stirring the container to make fine ice crystals.



1-3

For a cure potion or specialized potion, add minced lund petioles or crushed nigill buds to the mix, then return it to room temperature.



《2.Substituting Treant Fruit》

2-1

From mandragora and its subspecies, take three roots, three leaves, two stalks, one seed, one petal, two mushrooms, and one piece of bark for a total of thirteen materials. After drying each of them at their respective temperatures, combine them in the designated quantities.



2-2

Put the combined materials in a Transmutation Vessel, then cut off the air before grinding them finer than flour and mixing with olive oil. Ferment in a dark and tightly closed room for one year or hold at 104 degrees Fahrenheit under increased pressure for one hour.

2-3

Ladle out a spoonful and dissolve in alcohol with *Drops of Life*. If you're using treant fruit, knead the paste with olive oil, let it sit for one hour, and use the clear top of the oil.





《3. Extracting Arawne》

3-1

The roots of arawne act as painkillers, while the leaves offer anti-inflammation. Boil them in water with *Drops of Life* at 212 degrees Fahrenheit to break down the poison (which requires a temperature above 176 degrees Fahrenheit).

3-2

Once cool to the touch, add a drop of oil from pickling venomous glands of parasite leeches before it's completely cool. This oil dissolves in arawne broth without separating.



《4. Extracting Curique》

Pulverize the dried curique, oge dates, and mandragora, and extract them together. Distill liquid components of mandragora in clean water mixed with *Drops of Life*.

(When using as a medicinal substitute, dissolve in oil.)



《5. Combining All Ingredients》

Remove the four extracts from the by-products. Starting with the lunamagia extract, add them in order. Make sure that the *Drops of Life* in the treant fruit—or your alternative—are the same as the arawne extract!



The extraction of lunamagia is a keystone of high-grade potions! It can even be extracted in salt water, but its effects will be weakened. You can find dedicated extraction vessels for sale—and even vessels that incorporate magical tools!

Limit Breaker's Time

Kept ya waiting! This is the start of my story! There are several key words for Volume 4 hidden throughout the Life of Haage. It's a marvelous system where the words in bold are hints of the next book. That's what *Limit Breaker's Time's* all about!



Flames burn down. They temper. They light the abyss. They dehydrate mushrooms, train pupils, and bring truth to longstanding mysteries. After two hundred years, the flames are ready to blaze once more.

"Hey, chief, give me something to eat!"

Late into the night, Haage visited a small shop in a back alley of the Labyrinth City. This hole in the wall would have been crammed if it seated ten people. Fueled by charcoal, red flames lapped upward. This was a rare place in the Labyrinth City where people used magical tools to cook. This was the best kept secret in town: the shop offered grilled meat, tucked away in a hidden alley. The owner hailed from the self-governing dwarf dominion **Rock Wheel** and managed it with his family.

"I've got some good **rainy birds** today."

At the recommendation of the shopkeeper, Haage immediately started to nurse a drink at the counter as he watched the meat getting roasted. The **alcohol** poured into his tasteful glass came from a **glass atelier**, which offered quality and **special-grade** products that weren't offered on **the market** in the Labyrinth City. His little drink might as well be as valuable as a **potion**.

Fat trickled from the skewered meat and sizzled. Every now and then, the flames leaped up.

Limit Breaker's Time!!



"That's a nice *fire* you got going! Looks tasty."

Haage sank his teeth into the meat flavored with salt.

"You're late today," the shopkeeper commented.

"Oh, I was wrapped up in a typical *kidnapping* of some baby monsters. *Some guys from the outside* tried to sell them off and make a profit, so the parent monster showed up from the Fell Forest. Then the little one rampaged through the city, and it was a real big mess. I mean, it's payday. I should have been *set free* earlier, but now I'm a *free man*."

"What a day. So you released the pipsqueak back into the Fell Forest? Sooner or later, it might come back to repay *Master Haage*!"

The shopkeeper knew Haage's personality and laughed as he handed over more meat and topped up his drink.

"Let me give you some *sage* advice: Monsters are no joking matter," said Haage as he waved his hand in denial.

But from that small scratch on his arm, it was obvious that he didn't have the heart to kill a child—even if it was a monster. That must have been why he had caught and released it into the forest.

"No need to be shy. If this was a *fairy tale*, the monster would actually be a *spirit* that transformed into a *beautiful woman* and came back to repay you. It'd make a good story."

"A *legendary hero* wouldn't be *messing around after dark*. Well, I should get going here soon. The wife's waiting for me."

Filled up with alcohol, food, and the great conversation with the shopkeeper, Haage paid both the bill and his running tab with the money from his pay today and returned home to his waiting wife.

That's right, his wife was waiting for Haage—or for the wages in his pocket.

The pay envelope had grown extremely light after he paid his expensive bill and his tab. Any moment now, he would offer it to her without looking her in the eye.

What did Haage say to her? Did she forgive him? Or would she hold a grudge? No one would know the *truth*.

Limit Breaker's Time!!

AFTERWORD

First of all, I'd like to thank everyone who has read up to this point.

The volume started off with ox's loud-out-loud comic featuring Chubbyela's face—and contained one of the saddest scenes in this series.

Lynx's death.

I had settled on this from the time I was planning out this entire series.

In Volume 1, there is a scene where Mariela and Lynx wander through the City at dusk. "I'm as tall as Captain Dick," he says. The shadows that stretched out before him—with Mariela by his side—was an allegory for his imagined future.

As a matter of fact, that scene hinted the two of them wouldn't become adults together.

Lynx was an important character, giving Mariela a place to belong in the world after two hundred years and encouraging Sieg's mental and physical growth. In the original version of the story on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*, I didn't sufficiently explain when and how Lynx fell in love with Mariela, which was why I made a major revision to focus on the psyche of Lynx as the shadowmaster in Volume 3. As a result, his story gained more depth.

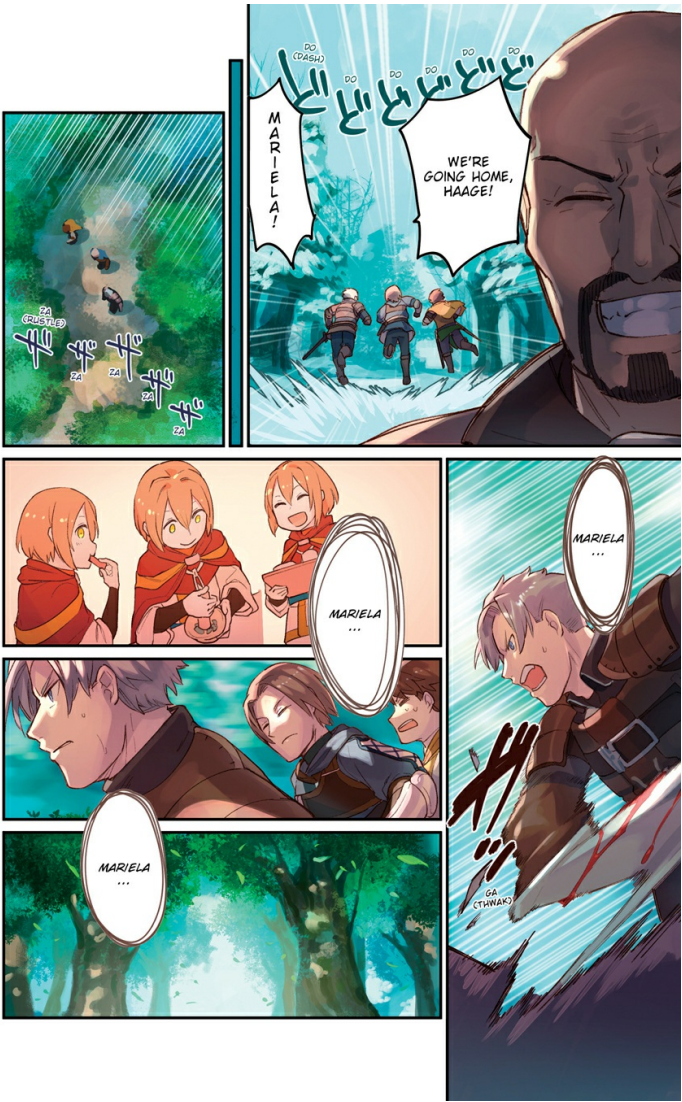
The catalyst for Lynx's tragedy was a worthless man known as Jay—the lowly, the weak, the foolish. He seethed with the kind of trivial spite that is familiar to everyone and couldn't even harm Mariela unless several conditions were met. I depicted Jay as a foil exemplifying Sieg's growth and as a symbol of malice to demonstrate that trouble can brew as small oversights and spite build up. He was an extremely unpopular character, even in *Shousetsuka ni Narou*. I may have succeeded in expressing the familiar and unsettling feeling.

Mariela lost Lynx, survived the Stampede all alone, and expressed her guilt for hiding her identity as an alchemist to enjoy a peaceful life. With renewed determination, the people are gearing up to defeat the Labyrinth. And the Sage of Calamity is heading for the Labyrinth City.

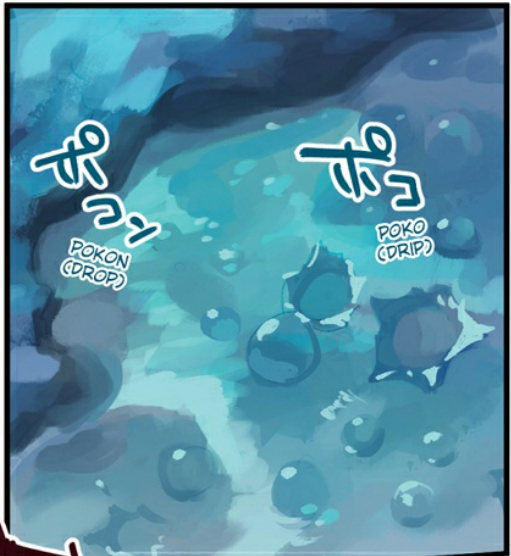
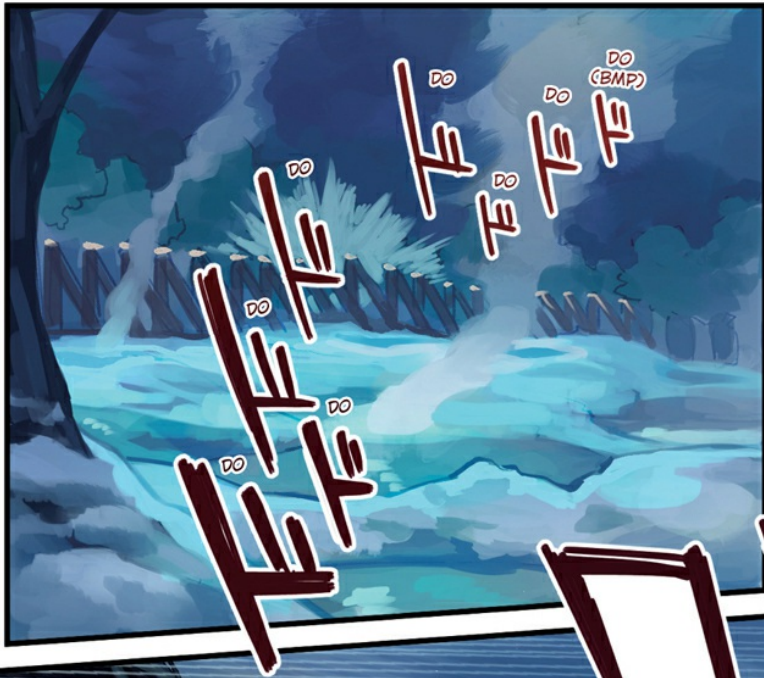
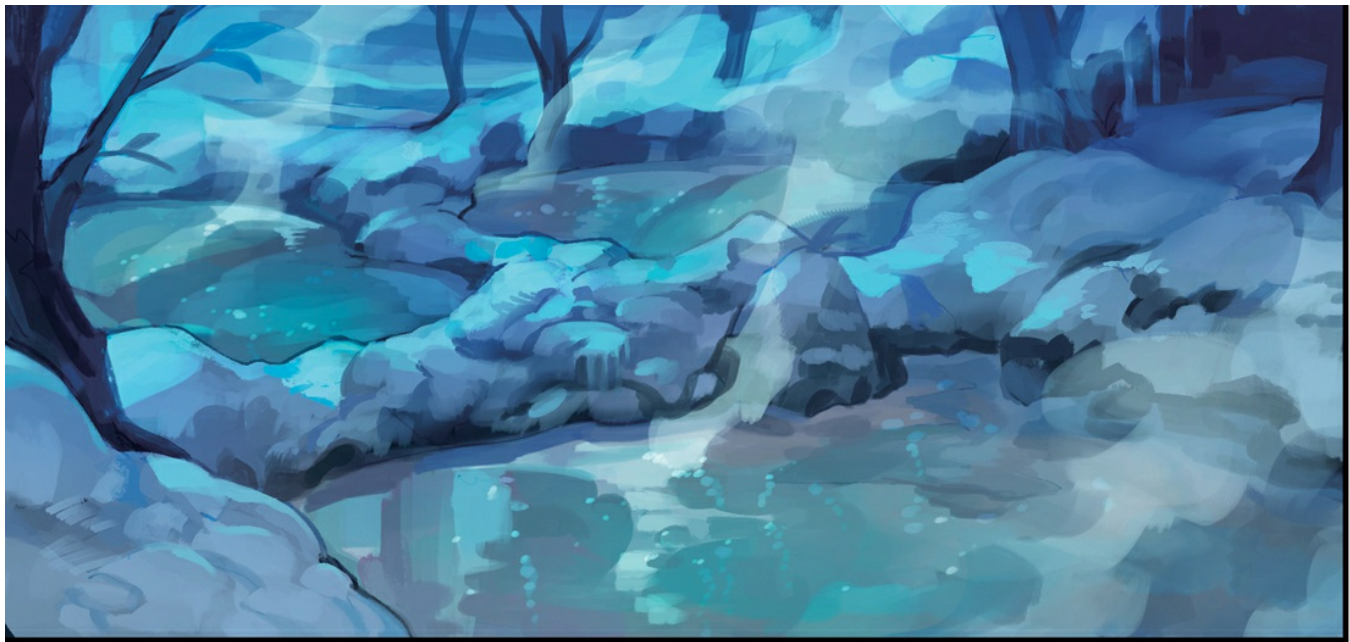
In Volume 4, I hope to focus on Mariela as she changes in big ways. I hope you'll enjoy it!

Before I end, I'd like to express my heartfelt thanks to ox, the illustrator who drew Chubbyela in the cutest and plumpest way; Shimizu, the editor who chose the Chubbyela scene to be in the opening pages of the book; and everyone else at Kadokawa.









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The Alchemist Who Survived

Now Dreams of a Quiet City Life

03



Usata Nonohara

Illustration by OX